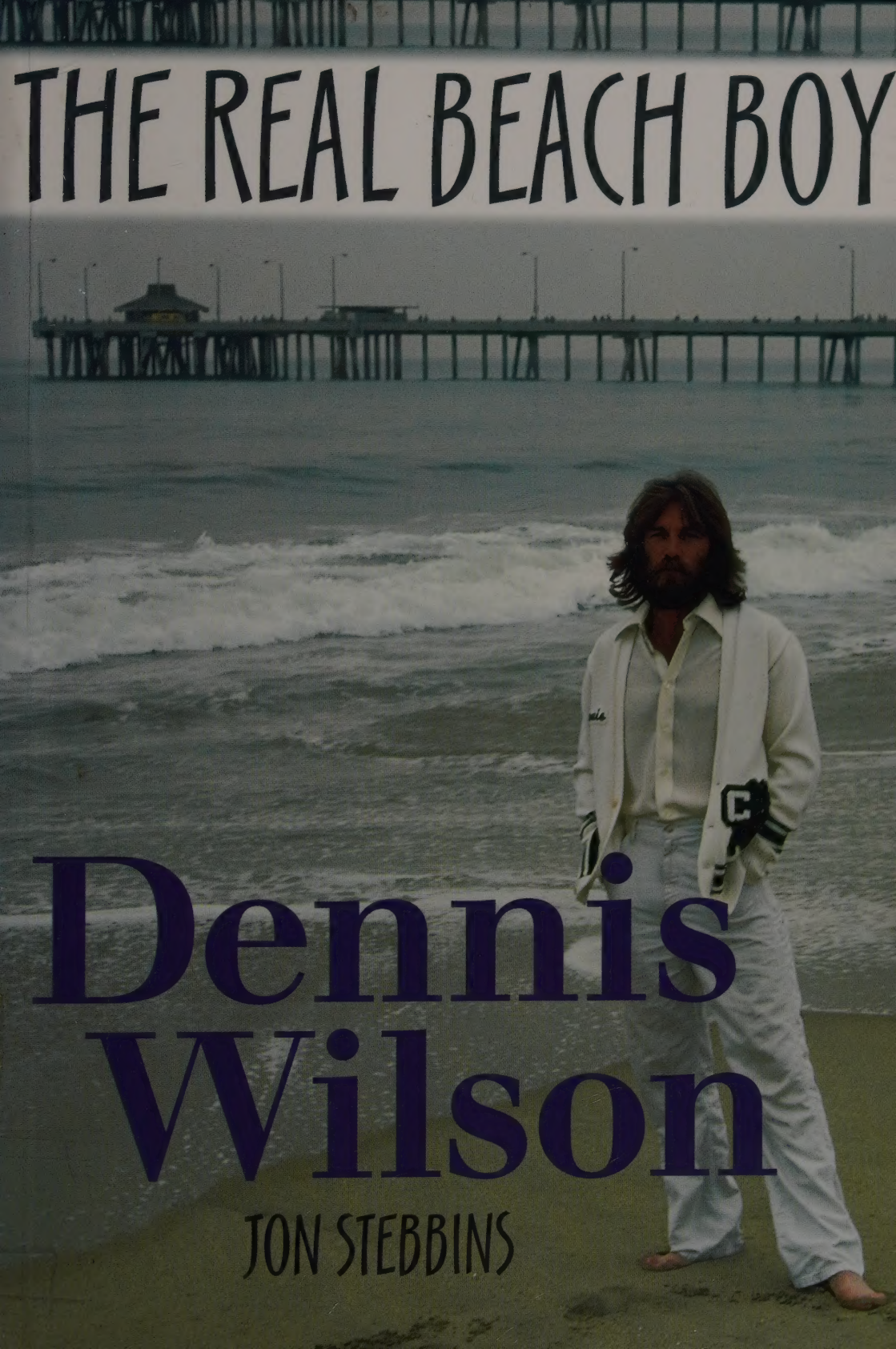
THE REAL BEACH BOY



Dennis Wilson

JON STEBBINS

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THE REAL BEACH BOY

Jon Stebbins

ECW Press

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CONTENTS

Foreword 9

1 The Unknown Icon 19

2 California Cool 31

3 In the Shadow of a Genius 45

4 Hardworking Drummer 59

5 A Diamond in the Rough 89

6 Charlie Don't Surf 129

7 Pacific Ocean Blue 141

8 Bamboo 179

9 The End of the Show 205

10 If I Could Live My Life Again 229

Source List 241

FOREWORD

What I saw the first time I made eye contact with Dennis Wilson shocked me. We met on an eerily quiet day in Westwood Village. Located just a few blocks from the UCLA campus, that usually bustling hive of shops, theaters, and restaurants was, for some reason, practically deserted on this gray September afternoon in 1978. As I slid from the white bucket seat of my friend Tom's 1966 Thunderbird, my bare foot hit the pavement and I glanced back at my reflection in the car's mirror-like navy-blue paint: there was a perfect example of the middle-class, white-skinned, long-haired, California garage-band punk. Within a few seconds, I would be meeting the original. Tom's gleaming classic Ford rumbled away, leaving me in what seemed to be a ghost town, and as I turned to cross the empty street there he was, sitting alone in the dark corridor separating a yogurt stand from an arcade.

He was resting on a narrow wooden bench, slumping against a cement wall. As I approached, unsure about what I would find, the legendary Dennis Wilson slowly turned his gaze upon me. There were traces of fear in his eyes. And those eyes were like nothing I had ever seen before — in all my twenty years. They had captured everything: the sixties, the beach, the music, the drugs, the sex, the riots, the love-ins, the peace, the war, the violence, the good vibrations. The joy and the horror. They revealed an ocean of raw feeling, too vast to evaporate, too overwhelming to deal with.

Dennis's initial fear smoothly shifted to recognition, and before we'd even spoken I felt him say it was okay. I was him, in a sense. Our

common ground was of the spirit, and I think our spirits were similar. Sagittarian, musician, a product of the culture that he helped spawn, I was somehow a part of him, and I believe he knew it. "Dennis, I love your music," I told him. He leaned back, smiled, and said a quiet "Thanks." Extending his hand, he invited me to sit down. We then had a conversation I will never forget, and that day I began writing this book in my mind.

In that cool, quiet corner of prime California commercial real estate, Dennis and I laughed a little about the whole Beach Boys thing. "What a trip it is to wake up one day and have all of that behind you," he told me as he took a drag off what we were smoking. Then he smiled and whispered, "One day you're fourteen with a bike and a root beer, the next day you're a multimillion-dollar conglomeration with hundreds of people depending on you. I just always wanted to have a good time." A good time he'd had for sure, but he would have to temper the intensity if he intended to remain among the living. Dennis never thought that way, though — only the next adventure mattered, the next girl, the next song. "Give it everything you've got," he advised me, a young guitar player taking my shot. "Look inside your heart and follow what's there," he insisted. We then talked about his solo album and how it had evolved into such a beautiful statement. Slowly, he said, "Everything that I am or will ever be is in the music. If you want to know me, just listen." I went home and listened to the album once more. What I'd glimpsed in Dennis's eyes that afternoon had ensured that it would never sound the same to me again.

What I didn't know at that point but later discovered while researching this project is that Dennis Wilson was preparing to face his demons on the day of our meeting. Severely addicted to multiple substances, he was steeling himself for an attempt at detoxification. He had cut his intake down on his own but needed professional help to go all the way. The fact that he would take the time to discuss his art with a fan in the face of such a difficult undertaking dramatically illuminates the unique nature of this man. His genuine empathy would prove to be both his most admirable asset and his Achilles heel, his greatest strength and his fundamental flaw. Never coming to grips with the insecurities that constantly gnawed at him, Dennis instead chose to self-medicate the pain until he was left with nothing.

Only more pain remained, and the big heart; that heart would keep on beating as long as it was loving someone, something, but it could never accept itself.

THROUGH the long process of writing this book, I have learned many things and confirmed many more that I already knew. Dennis's legend is not one that disappoints those who perceive him as a cultural hero. Most of the rumors that circulated about him have blended seamlessly: he was who he was, he wrote who he was, he lived who he was. A number of people who knew Dennis well generously shared their stories and impressions with me. His impact on their memories remains vivid, and a common thread connects their recollections. To them, Dennis was always an endangered species, and once he was gone his kind became extinct. He was the genuine article, and though an endless stream of imitators have manifested his influence and style, there will never be another Dennis Wilson.

My thanks go out to all of the people who made it possible for me to explore this fascinating subject and so selflessly facilitated my research. My resource pool began to fill at the age of five, when I first became aware of the Beach Boys and their fabulous sound. My sisters were in the midst of their teenage years in the early sixties, and they were the ones who first opened my ears and eyes to this cultural phenomenon. As the decade unfolded, I was exposed to nearly every form of popular music in my own home. Records were a big deal to us, as was the radio, and the Beach Boys remained a favorite even after their initial popularity had peaked.

During my first couple of years at high school, in the early seventies, I would often break out the old surf-era LPS. Luckily, I was blessed with open-minded friends who also enjoyed this great music, despite the fact that Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath ruled the day. When the huge resurgence of interest in the Beach Boys occurred in the mid-seventies, the same friends attended many of the band's concerts with me, and we happily celebrated the vindication of our taste. From the years 1978 through 1987, I lived in Los Angeles, trying to establish my own career in music, and it is during this period that I had direct contact with the principals of this book. After first meeting

Dennis Wilson, in 1978, I met Brian Wilson, Bruce Johnston, Mike Love, and Carl Wilson. I had conversations with each of them, and these ranged from several short chats with Brian to extended visits with Dennis and Carl. My first personal impression of each Beach Boy was gleaned from these encounters, as were some of the book's quotes. At the time, I had no idea that this information would one day find its way into a book — nonetheless, my impressions are still ingrained in my mind. Around the same time I also met Audree Wilson, Marilyn Wilson, Diane Rovell, Ginger Blake, Billy Hinsche, Hal Blaine, Gary Usher, Dean Paul Martin, Ricci Martin, Steven Desper, David Leaf, and Van Dyke Parks; I spoke with each of them at least once. All of this gave me a head start when it came to putting this book together, but of course I needed much more.

To those who helped me assemble the remaining pieces of the puzzle I give my most heartfelt thanks. The following people, throughout the past eighteen months, have spent precious hours sharing their memories of, and feelings about, Dennis with me: Tom Alford, Rodney Bingenheimer, Hal Blaine, Alan Boyd, Scott Brizel, Trisha Roach Campo, Ed Carter, Les Chan, Waldo Chester, Betty Collignon, Marisa Conover, Don Cunningham, Lee Dempsey, Dick Dixon, Chris Duffy, Ricky Fataar, Bobby Figueroa, Kim Fowley, James William Guercio, Bob Hanes, John Hanlon, Chuck Harter, Billy Hinsche, Gregg Jakobson, Jamie James, Stephen Kalinich, Carole Kaye, Elliot Kendall, Mike Kowalski, Harvey Kubernik, Karen Lamm, Earle Mankey, Mike Meros, Tom Murphy, Domenic Priore, Keith Reeves, Ed Roach, Jerry Schilling, Neal Skok, Bill Transville, Fred Vail, Ron Weeks, Barbara Wilson, and Carl B. Wilson. Others I wish to thank for their assistance and inspiration are: Irving Azoff, Dave Beard, Ginger Blake, Barry Brenner, Caroline Brenner, Felix Brenner, Ruthie Cappella, Tom Concannon, Daryl Dragon, Dennis Dragon, Brad Elliot, Dale Fahnhorst, Gary Gidman, Larry Greenbaum, Gary Griffin, Alan Jardine, Laurie Klobas, Alan Korn, David Leaf, Mickey McGowan, Gary Nichamin, Tom O'Neill, Diane Rovell, Roberto St. Orm, Ken Sharp, P.F. Sloan, John Stamos, Gary Stewart, Matthew Thompson, Ritchie Unterberger, Steve Ussery, Frank Vacanti, Brian Wilson, Carl Wilson, Carnie Wilson, Justyn Wilson, Marilyn Wilson, and Wendy Wilson.

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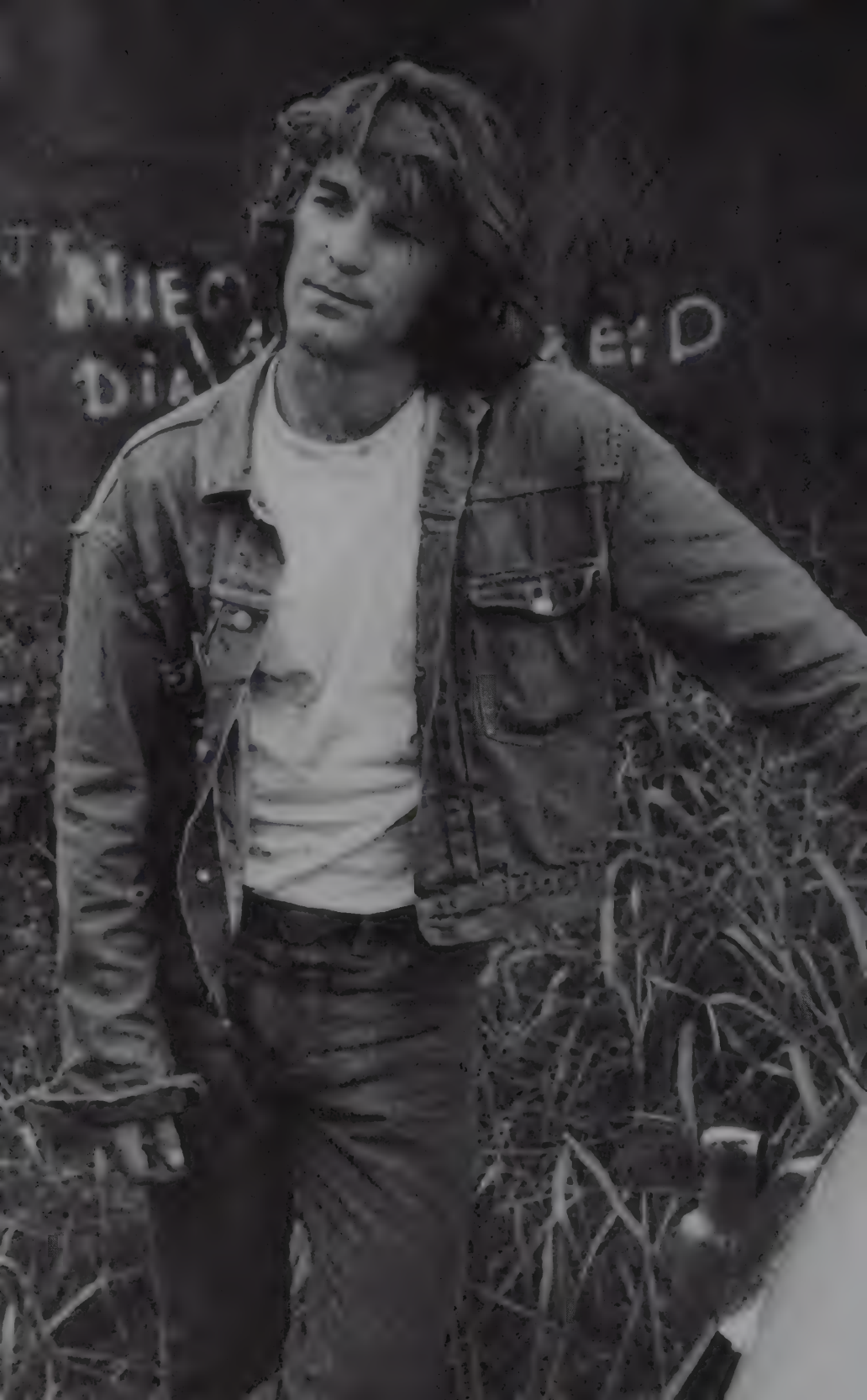
A very special thanks to my friend Chuck Harter for his unsurpassed dedication to this project and his early belief in my ability. My respect and love to the always-amazing Eddie Roach; he provided me with an open door to Dennis. My greatest gratitude is reserved for my family, for their wonderful support, ideas, and love. My sisters, Carla and Tina, for triggering my love affair with music. My parents, Carl and Iris, for their open minds, for their generosity, and for exposing me to all kinds of popular music from day one. And an added thanks to my mom for instilling in me a love of reading, without which this project would have been impossible. Finally, to my two greatest joys, my wife and my daughter: You are the essence of all the sweetness in my life. Everything I do, I do for you.

For Nadia and Shannon

They say I live a fast life. Maybe I just like a fast life of driving my Sting Ray and XKE, playing my drums, and meeting so many girls and guys (especially girls). I wouldn't give up this life for anything in the world. It won't last forever, either, but the memories will. . . .

— Dennis Wilson
summer 1964



1 THE UNKNOWN ICON

The icon has returned, but no one knows. This is one of those wonderfully surreal California scenes. Manhattan Beach is decorated with gauzelike remnants of fog. They hang passively in the thick, humid air. Bands of filtered sunlight create a familiar fuzzy sheen that magically bathes this still afternoon in the late summer of 1983. The Strand is full of happy young people, gloriously free. Convertibles, motorcycles, bikes, and skateboards are everywhere — the tools of the South Beach culture, the objects that keep it all flowing.

Closer to the water, sweet shrieks of laughter blend with the pounding of the waves. A tribe of tanned girls and guys, surrounded by colorful surfboards, cluster at the water's edge. There has been a hurricane out in the Pacific. Now, monster waves are drawing plenty of surfers to this tried-and-true spot. Swelling, curling, avalanches of saltwater. The surfers pump their fists skyward, emitting euphoric whoops, psyching themselves up for the impending thrill.

Among them stands a rumpled-looking character. He looks like so many other transient types you see around here, just a beach bum with a cigarette in his hand, a plastic jug at his side, T-shirt, jeans, lank hair framing a weathered, unsmiling face. He gazes at the muscular young men paddling their short pointy boards out towards the building sets. A distant memory is triggered in his alcohol-impaired mind of a day when he was seventeen, gamely maneuvering his nine-foot-two-inch board through equally treacherous surf. On that day, his body was strong, his head was clear, and his most valuable possession was his youthful vigor. Time does strange things to those who

show it no respect. His future has suddenly become his past. That one precious possession has inevitably slipped through his fingers.

The icon has returned to the very place where an improbable chain of events had once been set in motion, events that had shaped his life. From that life, in turn, had sprung the dreams and fantasies of thousands of others. This man had once so vividly personified beach culture: he had been *the* Beach Boy.

Now he sneaks a quick swig from his jug. No one notices. Here is the man who lived out all of their dreams, pioneered their own lifestyle and rituals, but he's practically invisible to them. A cough tears through his ravaged throat. Long ago, he and his brothers had used their smooth voices to express melodies as familiar to us as our own national anthem, but now his voice is just a pathetic rasp.

Residing within this weary, seemingly defeated shell is the heart of a true original, but the external traces of power and the magic he once possessed have vanished. He takes another long swig. No one notices. No one knows.

DENNIS CARL WILSON was born in southern California on December 4, 1944. He died on December 28, 1983. Between those dates he lived at a fast, furious, reckless pace. Words like *safe* and *sensible* just didn't apply. No thoughts of the future intruded on his consciousness; only the here and now mattered. As time passed, it became apparent that he was losing the ongoing battle with his inner demons. His career began to fail due to long-term self-abuse. Financial ruin, a string of failed marriages, alienation, and hopelessness plagued him. His tortured mind and battered body were giving out. Though his legendary heart remained intact — he could still never ignore a friend in need — he had lost his ability to save himself.

Once the epitome of California cool, Dennis Wilson created the mold for legions of longhaired rock-and-roll surfer boys. He was extraordinarily handsome, with the body of an athlete. He was charismatic — people came to idolize him. Dennis was also an extremely gifted songwriter, but he lived in the shadow of one of the greatest popular-music composers of the twentieth century: his big brother Brian. Brian watched closely as his younger brother hurled himself at

life, often writing songs with Dennis in mind: "Surfin'," "Catch a Wave," "Fun, Fun, Fun," "I Get Around" — each of these is descriptive of Dennis in some way.

In 1964, girls screamed when nineteen-year-old Denny bashed his drums. He drove Brian's tune "Surfin' USA" through to the hearts of thousands of teenagers attending a Beach Boys concert at the Santa Monica Civic Auditorium. That night, lead singer Mike Love glanced back, grinning, urging young Dennis on. White Fender guitars crackled with trebly surf energy through tube amplifiers as the youngest Wilson brother, Carl, let it all hang out on lead. The eager, diminutive Al Jardine laid down a bubbling reverbed rhythm chop. And Brian held it all together with his massive Precision bass while directing the band with thrusts of his instrument's long neck. Flashing his devilish smile, Dennis shook his blond, Beatle-length hair, enthralling his army of female fans. At that moment, he was on top of the pop world. Nothing could be more natural for him — he was born for this. In 1964, the only American musician whose teen appeal rivaled that of the Beatles was Dennis Wilson.

It all started at 3701 West 119th Street in Hawthorne, California — the home of Murry and Audree Wilson. Music was the glue that held the Wilson clan together. Though Murry supported his family with his machine shop, he considered himself a composer and had experienced modest success with his musical offerings. He inspired his sons with his love of melody and harmony; the family often sang together around the piano or driving along in the car. It was Brian, however, who took it all to the next level: his unique gift was knowing how to blend voices. He studied the modern sounds of the Four Freshmen closely and recruited any willing family member to help him experiment.

It was Carl and his mother, Audree, who lent their voices most regularly. Carl was a pudgy, soft-spoken boy with a gentle voice that had a lovely quality about it. Brian would eventually showcase this voice on some of his best material: Carl sang lead on "Good Vibrations," "God Only Knows," and many other Beach Boys classics. In those very early days, Carl was always there when Brian needed him. Dennis, however, was a different story. He rarely sat still long enough to participate, always straining at the bit, anxious to get out there and do something. But Brian knew how to put that to use, too.

In his early teens, Dennis liked to hang out at the beach. His legend took root along LA's string of south-coast beaches, known as the Strand. There he befriended in-crowd types, and his good looks made him popular with the local bunnies. In this specialized world, the guys who had "it" and those who never would were separated by their surfing skills. Although the sport had been around in some form or another for over four hundred years, the powerful surfing cult that was building in southern California circa 1960 would soon burgeon into a national craze. Of course, Dennis positioned himself in the middle of it all — combining an impressive lack of fear with physical strength and agility, he became an excellent surfer.

During a 1964 interview, Brian admitted, "Dennis is the only one of us who's a good surfer. He knows how to handle the board like a pro. The rest of us prefer to lie on the beach and watch him." Riding his board, Dennis not only affected the way surfing and the beach would be indoctrinated into popular culture, but he also lent the Beach Boys a legitimacy they would otherwise have lacked. While Brian would undeniably have written great music without him, it was Dennis who forged the connection between surfing and popular music that resulted in a reverberating explosion. The country went crazy over it, and Dennis had made it happen.

When the Beach Boys first started making records, Dennis was probably the least musical of the group. His voice was raspy and his vocal range limited, so, as he was very physical, drums were the obvious choice for him. Brian had a strong voice, and their cousin Mike Love was a good bass singer. Little brother Carl and high-school chum Al Jardine were both excellent tenors, so the group had no shortage of vocal talent. Brian gave Dennis little in the way of praise or encouragement in those early days, but he had noticed the earthiness of his middle brother's vocals — a quality no other band member had displayed. Realizing that it could impart a warmth and body to the mid-range of the Beach Boys blend, he decided to use Dennis's voice on most of the band's recordings. Although Mike's nasal voice routinely dominated the first Beach Boys offerings, and Brian's soaring falsetto and occasional lead singing were also at the forefront of the group's sound, Dennis's contribution was apparent from day one.

On the band's debut single, "Surfin'," Denny took the mid-to-low harmony line in the background vocals, but it is clearly his attitude and

sixteen-year-old spirit that the band was trying to put across. "Dennis is what stimulated the Beach Boys," says high-school classmate Dick Dixon. "He was really the genius at the outset." It was Dennis who convinced Brian that the way to access adolescent consciousness was to sing about something exciting and new. At first hesitant to act on this advice, Brian did eventually allow Dennis's innocent concept to lead the Beach Boys to their place in music history.

The common perception seems to be that Dennis Wilson was not a good drummer and that Brian, in the producer's chair, used LA session ace Hal Blaine on all of the Beach Boys' studio recordings. This doesn't even approach the truth. Dennis's drumming was primitive, yet spirited; he had an intuitive sense of the groove. Says songwriter P.F. Sloan, "Dennis may be a little off as a drummer and Hal Blaine is perfect, but they're both great drummers. The excitement I hear from Dennis makes the record for me. There's magic there and so much excitement."

Carl Wilson remarks, "Brian liked to use Hal because he was so much more reliable than Dennis, but whenever Dennis got the chance to play he always did a great job. He played drums on more of our records than most people realize. I think because he didn't play on *Pet Sounds* everybody assumes he never played at all, and that's just not the case."

Dennis would become best known for his aggressive drumming in the concert setting. As Blaine explains, "Dennis was the epitome of a Beach Boys drummer on stage. He was just fantastic; he pounded the hell out of the drums. They had a ball with him, and the girls, of course, were always looking at him." E Street Band and *Late Show* drummer Max Weinberg seconds this view: "Dennis projected such power. He plays the drums and hits the groove . . . it always made the corners of my mouth turn up in a smile."

And, Weinberg continues, "Dennis was really a focal point for the band, an image. He was happening onstage, and drummers became very important." Dennis contributed keyboard work to a number of Beach Boys songs, as well, but his musicianship was of secondary importance to his image. When teenagers rocked to the sounds of sunny beaches, big waves, fast cars, and fun fun fun, Dennis's look and lifestyle are what they imagined. As longtime Beach Boy friend and associate Fred Vail puts it, "Dennis embodied the spirit of the whole California culture."

In the mid-sixties Dennis was young, rich, and in an enviable position. He was a sex symbol, and so he became a tireless ladies' man, taking full advantage of all the pleasures of the flesh available to him. He bedded actresses, models, singers, fans, groupies, politicians' daughters, domestic servants, and streetwalkers with equal passion. A former lover maintains that "Dennis was a stud, pure and simple. Nobody ever made love like him. He was the ultimate."

A daughter of Ronald Reagan (who was governor of California from 1967 to 1975), Patti Davis, once confided: "When Dennis looked at me, I temporarily forgot that the rest of the world wasn't blue like his eyes. They just locked me in and all I could see was this color like the ocean on a perfect day." After meeting Dennis for the first time, Patti told her roommate, "He's the most beautiful man I've ever seen." In Paul Williams's book *How Deep Is the Ocean?*, former Beach Boy employee and Brian Wilson confidant David Anderle describes Dennis this way: "He is completely free, an animal, a free animal who is almost always controlled by his emotions and very seldom by his head." All of this sex appeal resulted in countless affairs and more physical pleasure than most men could even imagine. It also led to five failed marriages and a great deal of heartbreak and mental anguish.

Reflecting on her love affair with Dennis that spanned two marriages, model/actress Karen Lamm admits, "I always forgave Dennis. I loved him more than anything in the world. Nothing else ever meant that much to me." Though over sixteen years have passed since she last saw him, Karen's memories of Dennis remain vivid: "All of California still reminds me of Dennis. He is eternal with me." Also eternal is the emotionally charged music Dennis wrote with Karen in mind. When you hear the weary voice of a thirtysomething Dennis Wilson relating a tale of broken love in "Thoughts of You," the words ring achingly true. It's a song of genuine experience.

Dennis's string of broken relationships included some intense romantic highs, but no bond ultimately proved durable enough to keep him from wandering away. There was something deep inside that consistently prevented him from focusing on any one person or thing for very long. His second wife, Barbara, described it as an emptiness that he could not fill, no matter how hard he tried. The quality that made him adventurous and exciting became a huge character

ROACHCLIPS ARCHIVE

"THE WHOLE TRUTH AND NOTHING BUT-"
by the BEACH BOYS

Full Real Name: My birth certificate says: Dennis Carl Wilson.
Birthdate & Place: I was born in Los Angeles, Calif., on the cold winter day of December 4, 1944.
Personal Data: All 145 pounds, five feet ten inches of me is usually tanned, with blond hair and blue eyes.
Family Info: My mother and father, Murry and Audree Wilson, live in Whittier, Calif. I also have two rather well-known brothers, Brian and Carl.
Home Info: My home in Beverly Hills is a large, comfortable ranch which includes stables, three horses, two otters, three dogs, gangs of cats - and a pool.
Schools Attended: I went to York Elementary School, Hawthorne Junior High, and hated math.
Instruments, Played/Part Sung: With the group I play drums; for pleasure, I play piano and organ, and sing lead or tenor harmony.
Favorites -

Singing Groups: Beatles and Lovin' Spoonful.
Individual Singers: Frank Sinatra and James Brown.
Actor & Actress: Natalie Wood, Peter Sellers and Woody Allen.
TV Shows: I Spy and cartoons - all cartoons.
Colors: Red or blue, depending on my mood.
Foods: I love lamb chops, steaks, stews and spaghetti.

Hobbies: My favorite hobby is writing music. Soon, Brian is going to start writing with me - I'll enjoy that.
Sports: Fishing, but I spend more time sports car - and - drag racing. I have a Cobra and a Ferrari, I race my Cobra professionally and am a very good driver.
What Looked For In A Girl: I dig very, very sexy, groovy, quiet, intelligent girls with dark hair and brown eyes. I hate when they wear matching bell bottom sets; as a matter of fact, I hate bell bottoms.
What Do You Like To Do On A Date: It's more messing around than dating. I like to go to Gazzari's and sit in with whoever is playing there. I also like to go dining, dancing and to a show with a girl who's well dressed.
Business Plans & Ambitions: Investment - I have an accountant who does that for me. I want to travel and do sports car - and - drag racing films.
Personal Plans & Ambitions: I simply want to make lots of bread and be happy.

flaw that prompted him to risk even those things that most people would consider essential. This is a fascinating, yet very sad aspect of Dennis's personality: winner takes all; loser loses everything.

Overlooked in all the publicity arising from the phenomenon of Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys is the fact that Dennis was the most dynamic and influential personality in the band. "Dennis had more interaction with people than the others," says Fred Vail, who knew Dennis for over twenty years. "He hung out, he went to the drags, he cruised up and down Sunset. He loved people. He was a real people person. He was never aloof." Los Angeles-based music-industry veteran Harvey Kubernik concurs: "Dennis was never a snob. Dennis was accessible."

Dennis was also a man of boundless energy, and odds are that if you lived in LA you would run into him sooner or later. Kubernik recalls bodysurfing at Will Rogers Beach in the late sixties and being accidentally bumped by another surfer. Emerging from the water, he found himself face to face with Dennis Wilson, who was asking, "Are you OK?" "And I said sure . . . are you Dennis? And he said, 'Yeah,' then jumped back in the surf and paddled away." It was this regular-guy quality that made Dennis's image seem so natural. "But it was more than just an image," says Beach Boys sideman Mike Meros. "Dennis was for real. This was probably what made him so popular onstage." Meros witnessed Dennis's effect on people firsthand throughout their many years of touring together. "The fans picked up on his honesty and the sense of fun and goodwill that he transmitted effortlessly. He had much more natural charisma than any of the others."

The young Dennis was considered by some who knew him to be crude — even dumb. The rumor persists that "Dumb Angel," Brian's working title for his legendary *Smile* project, refers to Dennis. This seems likely, since Dennis inspired so much of Brian's writing. It is true that the young Dennis had the typical California-dude attitude, one that celebrated a certain mindless way of meandering through life. His early speaking style was a true reflection of teenage male culture, as re-created in countless movies, sitcoms, and commercials: it all became concentrated in a form of communication I call "dude-speak." But Dennis's halting speech patterns actually served to disguise a stuttering problem that surfaced while he was attending

Hawthorne High. Says Dick Dixon, "Dennis first revealed his stuttering problem to me in the cafeteria during our senior year. He made me promise not to tell anybody, so I never did. What most people don't know about Dennis is that in those days he was kind of shy."

To a certain extent, the personal problems that dogged Dennis throughout his life had their source within his own family. His father berated him constantly, and Brian was forever being held out to him as a shining example, the person he could never hope to be. Dennis had to struggle to be heard or even noticed; he was generally treated as an outsider by his family and later by the band. "They brought Carl along, but not Dennis," says Dixon, recalling the early days of the Beach Boys. He adds, "Dennis had to struggle for every inch he got."

While Dennis was by no means an educated or articulate man, he was very sensitive, brilliant at communicating through his music. As a teenager he became assimilated into a lifestyle that celebrated crudeness as a virtue, but as he matured, he began to demonstrate a remarkable thoughtfulness and emotional depth. "He was a vibrant, powerful guy who could just walk into a room and get everybody laughing," says drummer Bobby Figueroa. "He was one of the brightest people I've ever met. He had this tremendous aura about him."

For much of Dennis's early life, that vibrant energy percolated just beneath the surface. He showed flashes of inspiration but was never really taken seriously until his pent-up creativity literally burst out of him. That is why so many people, including his own brothers, were blown away when Dennis started producing gems like "Little Bird" from the *Friends* LP. They hadn't a clue what he was capable of. No one who knew Dennis at eighteen could have predicted how prolific he was to become by twenty-five. Dennis was a sleeper, and when he awoke, some were astonished, some were jealous, but all were impressed.

"He was like Brian, exactly," explains musician Darryl Dragon. "He knew exactly what he wanted. He'd sit at the keyboard until he found it." Describing his own music, Dennis once said, "The intention is absolutely a hobby. It's pure love, and when you're in love with something you can't control it. There is no way that you can control the feeling of love — it just is." Dennis's love for the craft of

creating music was profound, and the body of work he left behind is a testament to that love.

Dennis had no sense of his own influence — not only over the people around him, but also over an entire culture. He operated purely on instinct, and that is what makes his spirit so pure and original. As Harvey Kubernik remarks, "Dennis Wilson had the Beat Generation element to him of spontaneity, and 'go,' and 'now.'" This element set him apart from others — including his cousin Mike Love. A determined, hardworking, calculating man, Mike was in many ways the polar opposite of Dennis. From the earliest days of the Beach Boys, he and Dennis shared a volatile relationship; eventually, it would deteriorate into outright animosity. Mike Love, and a number of others in the Beach Boys camp, resented Dennis for his intense popular appeal.

This resentment would build over the years, and Dennis would make it worse by failing to control his many self-indulgences. Dennis, says Fred Vail, "never did anything half-assed. Whether it was the Pacific Ocean, drag racing, writing a song — he threw himself into everything. Unfortunately, that included drugs, alcohol, and other things that were more life threatening." As a result, he was never given the position within the band that he really deserved, and the Beach Boys as a whole suffered for it. "His drinking and drugs just short-circuited his better goals," says Mike Meros. Mike Love, of course, agrees: "I would tell him he was drinking too much and hurting himself, but he rebelled against restraints, whether man-made or natural."

Dennis's instinct for viable artistic growth could have helped the band greatly when the Beach Boys threatened to become an anachronism, but control of the band had ended up in the hands of those who were satisfied with regurgitating what Brian had finished creating years earlier. The emotionally fragile Brian retreated to his bedroom for most of the 1970s, and then the band's only hope was the other Wilson brothers, but any ideas they put forward for creative advancement were fought tooth and nail by those controlling insiders who continued to cling to the past.

As time went on, Dennis drained every last ounce of his formidable energy reserves. I realized he was in trouble when I spoke to him in 1978. The fire that had once vitalized him was virtually extin-

guished. While he spoke to me of his second solo LP nearing completion, there was something tentative in his voice. He smiled and wished me well with his usual warmth, but he had the air of a prizefighter who had stayed in the ring too long. His weariness was palpable, and it shocked me. After that, each time I caught a glimpse of him his decline was more apparent.

These comments from a fanzine article written by Don Cunningham best sum up Dennis's fall: "It was Dennis who actually fell victim to the California myth and not Brian. It was Dennis who lived the dream of a restless, sunkissed adolescence, until the dream had to die in the reality of time. Brian's problems are of a different sort. They involve the classic conflict between creative genius and societal demands. Dennis's downfall came in the way of heartbreak, and he had a huge heart. His heart was ultimately broken when it became obvious that one of the inevitable and appealing aspects of adolescence is that it is evanescent. One must grow to survive."

Dennis grew as an artist, but he remained a child in spirit until the day he died. Reflecting on his longtime friend and collaborator, Stephen Kalinich says, "He passed through time like a rider from another dimension. Dennis had a spiritual side that was magnificent and beautiful. You read so much about the darkness and the obsessions, and there was that too." Continues Kalinich: "I think the real reality of Dennis is evidenced in his music that he left behind. Even though he had a tortured soul, he was a magnificent being."

It's difficult to reduce such a being to a static portrait. Complex and mercurial, Dennis was, first and foremost, a supreme experiencer of life. He loved to travel, he loved to talk, he loved to laugh, he loved to love. He plunged himself into everything. He was a surfer, a drag racer, a biker, and an extreme outdoorsman who often risked life and limb but who somehow managed to come out of his adventures intact. He was a good Samaritan who gave his money away, never listening to the advice of those who thought he was foolish, and who continued to give until everything was gone. Practically anyone who asked he permitted to move in with him — including, at one point, the entire Manson "family." He was a sex symbol who believed that nearly every woman he met was attainable — and he frequently proved that he was right. He was a husband, a father, a brother, and a son who loved his family dearly, but who had trouble giving his

loved ones what they needed. Dennis was an artist, an underrated talent whose soul shines through his music. Displaying a rare creative integrity, he revealed his vulnerability, his inner torment.

And there is still more to add to this necessarily inadequate portrait. As unpredictable as the weather, Dennis would resolve to become an actor and then land a major film role with ease; shortly thereafter, he'd leave it all behind and never walk that path again. He was a fighter with a fiery temper, yet he could be moved to tears by the trials of others. Finally, Dennis was an abused child; he endured severe beatings, and his painful relationship with his father would forever fuel his demons.

He never had the chance to ground himself before fame and fortune descended upon him. At the age of thirty-nine, Dennis drowned in a drunken haze at the bottom of Marina Del Rey harbor. His body was found directly below the spot where he had once docked his beloved sixty-two-foot sailboat, *The Harmony*. The boat, like so many other things in his life, had been lost to creditors. Dennis had been diving off a friend's boat into the chilly December water. No wetsuit, no fear. Don't back down. Dancing, as always, close to the edge.

As the years have passed, it seems that Dennis has been all but forgotten. He sits at the back of the deceased-rock-and-roll-icon bus. Perhaps this is due to Brian's large footprint on popular music. Or to the fact that Dennis himself remains a misunderstood commodity. But, for those who witnessed the explosion in popularity of the early Beach Boys, Dennis's importance is indelible. Without question, Dennis Wilson, in his prime, was one of rock and roll's all-time purest manifestations of freedom. I think the best way to describe Dennis is to say that he was a lightning rod. So much of modern culture flashed directly through him. He was a cultural test pilot. His life was short, fast, brilliant, and sad.

2 CALIFORNIA COOL

Growing up in California during the early 1960s was a dreamy experience if you lived in a middle-class suburban neighborhood. It was a world of backyard barbecues, sweltering summer days, skateboards, and bikes. Life was set to music — music emanating from transistors and hi-fis and, most often, car radios. The car, circa 1962, was big and beautiful to look at. Cruising around with the radio blasting, everybody grooved to the popular artists of the day: Elvis Presley, Nat King Cole, Marty Robbins, Frank Sinatra, the Kingston Trio, Bobby Vinton, and the Four Seasons. The word *Beatles* was not yet a part of the common vocabulary.

I inhabited this world when I first became aware of the Beach Boys. A raw and rocking little tune called "Surfin' Safari" had made its way onto radio playlists, and I remember the neighborhood being abuzz over this new sound called "surf music." The fad had an instant impact on my world, even though we were located at least an hour from the ocean — I even recall a kid from down the block hauling a surfboard past my house en route to a friend's swimming pool.

While the country was catching the Wilson brothers' California music wave, Dennis Wilson, seventeen years old, was grabbing his board and heading for the ocean. While we listened, he surfed. Says his high-school buddy Dick Dixon, "26th and Manhattan Beach was the spot. If you wanted to be seen, that was where to be seen at." But the man who was to become a surfing icon was still in his formative stage; a little polishing was required. "Dennis and I would go to D&W [Doc Waller Beach], which was up north by El Segundo," says

Dixon, who would often pick Dennis up in his '58 Ford wagon. "We would go down there because neither one of us were great surfers. So we would go where no one else was, just to learn." According to Dixon, there were several professional-level surfers at the Manhattan location, and he and Dennis were striving to fit in there. "When we got better we would go up to 26th Street, which was the big school hangout." As Dennis's surfing skills improved, his confidence grew.

When the words, "Let's go surfin' now, everybody's learnin' how" shot out over the AM airwaves in the fall of 1962, I remember exactly how they made me feel: *excited*. The lead singer sounded like some teenage punk that should have been sitting out a detention at the local high school. The group vocal arrangement was extremely pleasing to my young ears, although their spare sophistication would be lost on me until much later. Still, what I admired most about the song was the primitive rhythm section chugging along in perfect garage-band fashion, the quick electric-guitar shot (from fifteen-year-old Carl Wilson), and that beat. Simple and thrilling, the drums laid down the language of freedom, the dance of liberation. It was exhilaration, acceleration, a celebration. It was Dennis Wilson introducing his attitude to the world.

I had no idea who these Beach Boys were or what they looked like until I saw a copy of their first LP, from Capitol Records. I remember thinking that the scene on the cover of the boys in that old truck pointed towards the waves was really cool. Flipping the cover over, I saw a skinny guy with a flat top, a balding guy, a round-faced kid who looked about twelve, and a kid with the longest hair I had ever seen on a teenage boy. Dennis, of course. His blond bangs hung down past his eyes, and he seemed to be overflowing with a kind of fuck-you irreverence. I just thought, "Wow. That guy is so cool looking." There was another guy in the photo (the Wilsons' neighbor David Marks) who had longish hair, too.

Next my eye traveled to a shot of the group standing and singing: there was Dennis — shoeless, in a white T-shirt and blue jeans — displaying his bushy blond hairstyle. It wasn't until a year and a half later that the Beatles would shock North America with their flowing locks — still, many people insist that the British Invasion brought long hairstyles into our culture. I disagree. Dennis Wilson and a

The surfer lights the fuse — Dennis in 1962

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small army of surfer boys initiated that trend stateside. The "surfer cut," as it came to be known, was a radical thing to behold in 1962. Few parents would permit their sons to sport the look. Later, when the Beach Boys toured Europe, a journalist asked Dennis, "Is that Beatle hair you have?" Dennis shot back, "No it's not Beatle hair, it's my hair."

When present-day music historians refer to the Beach Boys as clean-cut and all-American, they're forgetting what the band actually was when it started out: it was, pure and simple, a rough and rowdy garage band. Compared to Ricky Nelson, Elvis, Annette, Frankie Avalon, Bobby Rydell, and other contemporary teen sensations, the Beach Boys were positively counterculture. There wasn't anything like them on the national scene. They played their instruments, they wrote their songs, they had a cool image, and they were not for adults. The songs were catchy, filled with exciting harmonies, and the guitars and drums were loud. The sound was very electric. Some band members had long hair. Sound familiar? Yeah, Yeah, Yeah — all of this could add up to a description of the Beatles, but they hadn't

crossed the Atlantic yet. The Beach Boys were first, and the summer of 1963 was all theirs.

The early Beach Boys sang about only two things: surfing and cars. Lennon and McCartney, products of a different universe, would obviously never touch on these themes. Left to his own devices, Brian Wilson reflected the teenage nirvana that surrounded him, and in the process created a vision of a California that was like a planet unto itself. And Dennis guided him on.

Brian had watched as his thrill-seeking brother made a name for himself among the local surfers. "My brother Dennis came home from school one day," recalls Brian, "and he said, 'Listen you guys, it looks like surfing's gonna be the next big craze.' He said I should write a song about it. So it happened we wrote a song just due to Dennis's suggestion." Brian went on to write a number of classic tunes based on that theme. The best of these was a song adapted from the Chuck Berry hit "Sweet Little Sixteen." On January 31, 1963, the Beach Boys, including David Marks, gathered at Western Recorders on Sunset Boulevard. Between the hours of 8 and 11:30 PM, they laid down what many consider to be the greatest surfing track ever.

It began with a blast of Carl's Fender Jaguar guitar and took off from there. "Surfin' USA" was released in the spring of 1963 and became a nationwide hit, galvanizing teens with its great lyrics about being "gone for the summer" and telling "the teacher we're surfin'." The Wilson brothers created a wall of thumping reverb draped with beautiful vocal harmonies, and Mike Love snapped off the lead vocal in his typical smart-ass-kid fashion. Dennis's drum performance features perfectly boisterous snare flurries and solid bass-drum kicks. While many have assumed that session pro Hal Blaine played the drums on this song, the master tapes and session sheets indicate that it was Dennis — playing his heart out. The band appeared on Red Skelton's television show in May of 1963, performing "Surfin' USA" before a national audience. This is the song that made the Beach Boys rich and famous. Though they were still just emerging from teenhood, from this point on things would never be the same.

As fame and fortune took hold, the Beach Boys lined up their priorities: the first thing they did was buy themselves cool cars. Remarked Dennis: "Riding around in a car was a big deal. Going out to the hot night spots at six at night, hanging out at the hamburger

joint." The Foster's Freeze on Hawthorne Boulevard was a favorite stop, another was the Wich Stand on Slauson Boulevard. Former southern California beachnik Mickey McGowan told me that the local teens gathered at the Wich Stand "just to hang out and be seen." Many of those kids now look back fondly on the occasions when a Beach Boy would pull up in his new ride. "Everyone would start whispering 'Beach Boy, Beach Boy,'" says McGowan. "What I remember most is that Dennis always had the best car." Brian and Carl each bought a Pontiac Grand Prix, a kind of luxury muscle car — big, powerful, gorgeous. Dennis went for the ultimate American car: a Corvette Stingray. You can see them proudly showing off their gleaming new machines on the cover of the 1964 LP *Shut Down, Volume 2*.

Dick Dixon vividly remembers the day that gorgeous blue 1963 split-window 'Vette entered Denny's life. He showed up at Dixon's door within hours of buying it. "He loved that car!" remembers Dixon. "The first thing we did was drive it straight over to Hawthorne High. We did the cruise right through the parking lot, stopped it right where you weren't supposed to stop, and let everybody just kind of come out and take a look." As his fascinated schoolmates flocked to his stunning new acquisition, Dennis must have wondered if it was all a dream. "In that day, that was one hell of a car," adds Dixon. At eighteen years of age, Dennis suddenly had the world by the tail, and the Stingray was a token of that heady power.

The car, a concrete symbol of success, was, of course, also a symbol of teen freedom, a theme that the Beach Boys would exploit in creating a string of smash hits. The flip side of their first hit single was a car classic called "409," about the Chevrolet Impala big block that became a drag-racing legend. The late Gary Usher, who co-wrote "409" with Brian, never actually owned an Impala. He revealed that by the time he'd saved up enough money, "the 426 Hemi was considerably faster. I won many events at the San Fernando drag strip with my 426 and a young, exuberant Dennis Wilson by my side." The song "409" may be the best example of the early garage-band sound of the pre-Beatles Beach Boys. The vocals are absolute snot-nosed bliss, and the grittiness of the guitar, bass, and drums has punk rock written all over it. Here Dennis finds a drum groove that has such a primitive feel it almost seems Neanderthal. The track is a celebration

of crudeness, and it should be considered in any discussion of the early garage genre.

Dennis also contributed some of his apelike drum clubbing to a Gary Usher-produced project called the Four Speeds. The 1963 release "My Sting Ray" and its flip side, "RPM," both feature an adolescent Denny banging the skins. The Beach Boys returned to car territory with the flip side of "Surfin' USA." That cut, "Shut Down," became a much bigger hit than "409," and it constitutes a great blow-by-blow account of what drag racing is all about. Somehow, it comes off as more professional-sounding than "409." Even though the instrumental lineup is the same, except for some tuneless saxophone honking courtesy of Mike Love, it loses something in spontaneity and gains something in listenability. Dennis again turns in a caveman-like performance: his drum bashing is pure, innocent personality.

At the beginning of 1964, the Beach Boys started cropping up in the national teen press. Magazines like *16* would write about them and feature photos for their teen readers to ogle. When juxtaposed with the likes of Rick Nelson, Troy Donahue, and Elvis Presley, the Boys evidently lacked the matinee-idol look — except for Dennis. Though the other band members were by no means bad looking, and though each would share the popularity spotlight, Dennis so clearly had something extra. It was Dennis who received the lion's share of the fan mail, and he was featured most often in the fanzines.

During the band's personal appearances, the adulation of the females in attendance was aimed almost exclusively at Dennis. A 1964 *Tiger Beat* magazine article entitled "Love Life of the Beach Boys" (reprinted in Alan Clark's *The Beach Boys: The Early Years*) describes Dennis like this: "Bushy-haired, blue eyed, flame tempered, restless, moody Denny is the sex symbol of the BB5. During performances Dennis gets the loudest screams. Most of the audience banners are directed at him. He's the object of most of the hair pulling during the mad get-aways after a concert. Girls storm the stage and tear the drum sticks out of his hands. His drum stool has been stolen scores of times. He receives the most purple-pash [love] letters." Brian would admit that for the rest of the band this was a little "hard to handle. The girls would be going 'Dennis, Dennis' and run right past us to get to him." Still, Dennis's ferocious appeal gave the group a solid foothold, and later, as so many other acts bit the dust, the Beach

"The girls would be going 'Dennis, Dennis' and run right past us to get to him" (Brian Wilson)

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Boys survived. And there was the huge advantage of having the right kind of haircut: in February of 1964, the Beatles rocked the world of pop music right off of its axis, but the Beach Boys, boasting the shaggy-haired Dennis, stayed their mainstream course.

The importance of a rock act's look increased radically when the Beatles came along. Many thought this scruffy mop-top thing was a passing fad, but those who resisted it would forever be labeled as squares. Acts like the Four Seasons, Bobby Rydell, and even Elvis himself would suffer because of image shifts in the pop world. The British Invasion undermined American acts; few managed to maintain their popularity. There were two major reasons why the Beach Boys thrived in the face of the Fab Four onslaught: Brian Wilson and Dennis Wilson.

Wisely, the band decided to push its assets. Dennis started being featured more prominently on Beach Boys album covers. His hairstyle actually had a convertible aspect — he could comb his hair back into the more accepted "car club" sweep preferred by hot-rodders or let it flop down for a more radical, surfer look. Now he was able to

adjust his look to rival that of the British rockers. Look at the photos that grace the band's 1964 LPs *All Summer Long* and *Beach Boys Concert*: there, front and center, is Dennis, displaying his flowing locks to give the girl fans something serious to fantasize about as they listened to the music. This may seem silly in retrospect, but at the time it was crucial to the Beach Boys' success.

One sweet young Midwestern girl developed a fantasy not unlike those of thousands of others across the United States. Her golden hair and piercing blue eyes had made her popular with the local boys, but something else was occupying her preteen mind. She loved to envision herself and Dennis Wilson cruising around in a yellow Jaguar XKE convertible. The handsome drummer would smile at her as they roared up the coast in his sleek new sports car. She would conjure up this scene again and again, then one day she grabbed a marker and scrawled the words "I Love Dennis" across his album-cover photo, which she'd reverently hung on her bedroom wall. What makes this particular story different from most of its type is that Dennis actually had a yellow Jaguar XKE at this time. How did the girl know? Perhaps it was destiny. Her name was Karen, and in ten years time she would become Mrs. Dennis Wilson.

While Dennis mesmerized Beach Boys fans with his image, Brian met the Beatles head on with amazing advances in both composition and production. The superior quality of the Beach Boys' sound made the band instantly identifiable. The song "I Get Around" is clearly ahead of its time, and it signals the speed at which Brian had developed. With its edgy guitar/sax bursts doubled with trebly reverbed Fender flicks, electric-organ fills, and an arrangement that stops, goes, accelerates, and then stops and goes a few more times, the song is nearly otherworldly in its inventiveness. Each band member's voice is showcased, and this helps to make this single as good as any pop record ever made. As the Beatles took American AM radio by storm, "I Get Around" shot straight to number one and proved to the world that the Beach Boys were indomitable.

There was an element of the record-buying public that considered the Beach Boys more virile than the Beatles and other members of the British Invasion force. The Boys played up their native athleticism with songs like "Be True to Your School." Brian had been a high-school football quarterback and a varsity baseball player, and Mike

was a veteran of the Dorsey High track team. Dennis had the most muscular body in rock and roll due to years spent being an all-around outdoors kind of guy; he'd also begun building up his wiry torso while at Hawthorne High. "Our physical-fitness activity consisted of a metal tube with two twenty-pound canisters of cement on either end," says Dixon. "Dennis was a workaholic on that stuff. He wasn't large in frame, but he was powerful in strength. He would do reps on top of reps on top of reps."

The Beatles were all slight, chain-smoking, pale, and a little effeminate. While androgyny would later become a positive attribute among rock stars, the average American teen of the mid-sixties was far more comfortable with the rugged masculine stereotype. Brian Wilson made his greatest statement of macho bravado with his song "Don't Back Down," which is, simply and succinctly, about having balls. Again, he drew his inspiration from Dennis. That song appeared on the album *All Summer Long*, which had a photo spread on the cover featuring the Boys playing football, riding horses, and frolicking in the sand with some beautiful California girls.

The *All Summer Long* liner notes include a "personal message" from each Beach Boy to his fans. These are especially fun to read thirty-five years later; they reflect the state of mind of five young men who had come out of nowhere to realize their biggest dreams, and they provide a window onto another era. Dennis's comments seem prescient in retrospect. He speaks of living a "fast life" and of enjoying meeting so many girls and guys, "especially the girls." He then goes on to say, "I know it won't last forever, but the memories will." The aspirations of so many were his own reality. Dennis was living out the dream of California cool.

You can get a sense of the level of excitement that the Beach Boys generated in concert circa 1964 by listening to the *Beach Boys Concert*. This classic album begins with the voice of promoter Fred Vail intoning those memorable words, "And now, from Hawthorne, California, to entertain you tonight . . . the fabulous Beach Boys!" As the stripe-shirted quintet tears into a high-RPM version of "Fun, Fun, Fun," the audience goes through the roof. The band had honed its live act — it was now a series of positive-energy bursts tempered with solidly performed ballads like "Graduation Day."

The Beach Boys never made the mistake of taking themselves too

Recorded by THE BEACH BOYS on Capitol Records

I GET AROUND

Words and Music by BRIAN WILSON

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seriously, and their fans genuinely appreciated it. Band members would often position themselves in the parking lot after a concert, patiently signing autographs until their hands were sore. In their early touring days, they hauled themselves and their equipment around in a rented '59 Chevy station wagon; their appeal to the average working American had an authentic foundation.

During one of their peak periods (they had a few), the Beach Boys did a live set at the TAMI Show (Teenage Music International), a concert filmed in the fall of 1964 at the Santa Monica Civic Auditorium. They delivered a power-packed series of tunes to an overflowing house, producing an amazing electricity. The crowd went into a frenzy. Led by Brian, the Boys had a dynamic edge that they could never recapture after he had retreated from the live setting. That night in Santa Monica, the three Wilson brothers were like a single brain sensing its way through the music, proving that although Brian eventually became essential only in the studio setting, at one point he'd also helped to make the live Beach Boys experience a truly unique one. Acts like the Rolling Stones and the Godfather of Soul, James Brown, shared the TAMI bill with the Beach Boys, and it's fascinating to witness them holding their own in such a highly charged atmosphere. In the concert footage, it's clear that the cameras have fallen in love with Dennis as he pounds away at his drums, driving a seemingly peaked-out audience to even higher heights. Shaking his head, firing off killer smiles, he seduces the room.

Also in 1964, the Beach Boys appeared in two feature films. Their first appearance was a brief one, at the very beginning of the Disney romp *The Monkey's Uncle* — they back Annette Funicello through the title track. Their contribution to *The Girls on the Beach* was more substantial, and although the movie is your standard lightweight teen fare, the Boys shine. Dennis is a natural screen presence — one wonders why it took another six years for someone to cast him in his next movie. Performing "Little Honda" in that film, he seems so at ease as he grins at the girls clustered around him — his joy and his sexiness come through loud and clear. By comparison, the other members of the band appear a bit stiff. The Beach Boys never got a chance to make their own *A Hard Day's Night*, but *The Girls on the Beach* gives us a glimpse of what might have been.

All of the Beach Boys had been overtaken by stardom too early

The times they are a changin'

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and too easily: each one of them would pay the price. Dennis, the least disciplined, would be the most profoundly affected, and the effects were permanent. He'd never really gotten a handle on his life, but as long as the riches were flowing and the act was in demand this didn't seem to be a problem to him. But, at such a young age, he'd already consumed far too much alcohol, bedded far too many women, and made flirting with disaster a daily activity. His father, Murry, had already been obliged to step in and straighten things out in the aftermath of several bad incidents. When Dennis would inform him of the latest trouble, Murry's typical response was, "Smooth move son, smooth move."

Fred Vail, who knew Dennis from the time he was nineteen, says, "I don't think Dennis was the type of person who ever felt he would live to an old age." But at nineteen nothing was going to stop him. He had an unfaltering ability to charm those who had to put up with

his recklessness. Says Vail, "He certainly knew he could get away with just about anything he wanted to get away with." Dennis's friend Ed Roach adds, "He was as bad as he could possibly be, and he was having a real difficult time getting punished for it."

As 1964 drew to a close, the world of popular music had been forever altered by the rise of the young consumer. Record sales soared to new heights, and this trend would continue for decades. A burgeoning youth culture was issuing its demand for a steady supply of new music. It had all started with Elvis Presley in the fifties and had grown immensely with the arrival of the Beatles and the rest of the British Invasion. The Beach Boys had thrived in the transition, and they continued to enjoy tremendous success, no matter who else was popular at the time. The next few years would see them holding steady near the top of the sales charts; they were also a consistently popular concert attraction. They would, however, slip year by year until, by the end of the decade, they would find themselves in serious danger of losing what little standing they still had.

So, in retrospect, 1964 can be considered a golden year for the Beach Boys: they'd achieved a number-one single and a number-one LP, along with several other top-ten entries. It was also a golden time because the critics had begun to take note of the Beach Boys' unequaled craftsmanship — they were building the most sophisticated recordings in the business. The competition was taking heed, too: the Beatles knew early on that their biggest rival in the realm of artistic growth was not the Stones, the Hollies, the Kinks, the Who, the Zombies, or any of their other fellow countrymen. The only act that could surpass them in the struggle to create better and better recordings was Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys. Eventually, this rivalry would drive both groups to new levels of experimentation. It would also help to push Brian Wilson over the edge, and he would never really find his way back.

3 IN THE SHADOW OF A GENIUS

"Brian wilson is the Beach Boys. He is the band. We're his fucking messengers. He is all of it. Period. We're nothing. He's everything." So said Dennis Wilson (quoted by Nick Wise) of his big brother. Dennis was in complete awe of Brian for much of his life. The magnitude of the gift that Brian possessed was sometimes overlooked and other times unappreciated by those within the Beach Boys camp. Some saw the sensitive Brian as a flawed and temperamental young man, while others just treated him as a meal ticket. Dennis, however, chose to stand behind his brother, to support his often whimsical, unpredictable turns of mind. To do this, he had to endure the frustration of being virtually ignored as an artist; he also had to resign himself to existing within the large shadow cast by a man whom many have called a genius.

While most of the people involved in the inner workings of the band anticipated that the more stable Carl would be the one to develop a creativity similar to Brian's, they missed the mark. After years of watching, listening, and doing Brian's bidding, Dennis would blossom into a gifted composer in his own right. Though his style would clearly reflect his enormous creative debt to Brian, the music Dennis wrote and produced was ultimately all his own; it tapped into different regions of the mind and soul than did Brian's. Though never as popular as Brian's music, Dennis's work would nevertheless be acclaimed by critics and find its own niche among Beach Boys fans. "He had what you might call classical roots," remarks longtime Beach Boy sideman Ed Carter. "Dennis came up with chords and

inversions that were astounding. He was a real sensitive guy who spent a lot of time at the piano picking out those wonderful sounds."

As all those subtle lessons flowed from the fertile imagination of the older Wilson, wouldn't the restless, reckless Dennis be the last person to pick up on them? Brian himself once said that Dennis "couldn't sit still" in the studio, and so Brian generally preferred to use veteran session man Hal Blaine on drums. Session bassist Carole Kaye says that Dennis would "stop in and listen for a short time, listen to one of Hal Blaine's jokes, listen to Brian's track of that tune for the day, and smile, and that was it — out he'd go." Apparently, Denny stayed around just long enough to soak up something, because when he finally decided to show his cards, many jaws dropped.

The typical three-child family has been said to produce three common personality types. The oldest child receives the most attention in infancy and therefore will often become the most productive and self-confident. The youngest child is more indulged than the others, remaining somewhat of a baby forever. The middle child has trouble adjusting to being denied the special advantages the older and younger siblings enjoy. While this model is, of course, extremely broad, the Wilson family seems to fit into it quite neatly. The talented Brian was a tough act to follow, Carl always displayed a childlike gentleness, and Dennis, sandwiched between them, craved more love and attention. Brian was very tall at six feet three inches; Dennis stood about five feet nine inches. Brian was awarded good grades; Dennis got Ds and was finally kicked out of school. Brian was a popular athlete type who made his mom and dad very proud; Dennis smoked, drank, and cussed like a sailor. Brian demonstrated at an early age his ability to play musical instruments and sing; Dennis was beaten by his father for his out-of-control behavior and spent most of his time away from the house. Carl, his mother's angel, was rarely the object of Murry Wilson's wrath. All of these factors may contribute something to an understanding of the complex dynamic that existed between the three boys.

When Murry did turn on Carl, Dennis often threw his own body between them. Though Dennis often teased his little brother about his weight — he'd sometimes call him "Porky" — he was always fiercely protective of him. Much later, when an alcoholic Dennis had become a constant embarrassment to his bandmates, Carl never

Dennis the Menace

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showed any outward disdain for his behavior, probably because Carl forever idolized Dennis for his early bravery. Brian, too, was a victim of his father's rage, and some have attributed his loss of hearing in one ear to an early beating, but from all reports Dennis was treated far worse. Murry would throw him against walls, or hold his hands to a flame if he played with matches. "My dad was an asshole," said Dennis. "He beat the crap out of us all the time. He would say, 'Don't go out in the rain, and don't lie.' So you'd go out in the rain, and you would lie about it, and he'd hit you twice." Dennis's ex-wife Karen has described Dennis as Murry's personal "punching bag." "His biggest hang-up was his lack of acceptance from his dad."

Hoisting weights at Hawthorne High, Dennis was likely developing a defense mechanism. He engaged in intense physical workouts, probably believing that if he became strong enough, he'd be able to

protect himself and his brothers from Murry. Pumping iron was also a means of burning up some of the frustration that was building inside him. "I think Dennis worked out so much because it was a way for him to rid himself of anxiety," says Dick Dixon. Murry, he adds, was "alarming and rude when other kids came around." To Dennis, Murry became an enigma and then ultimately an obsession.

Still, all the while, the Wilson brothers were evolving as artists. Young Brian was very serious about making music, and he began to explore the possibility of forming a group. He was enamored with the vocal gymnastics of acts like the Four Freshmen, who were probably — aside from Phil Spector — his strongest musical influence. "Harmonically, they were the foundation of the Beach Boys sound," confided Dennis. "The Hi Lo's, too, had a little bit of an influence. The arrangements of the Four Freshmen were so ahead of their time, the parts were actually perplexing. You couldn't figure out how they could possibly come up with those arrangements." Only Brian had the ear and the concentration to unravel those intricacies. "It was like a mobile. It all worked together," Dennis continued. Before long, Brian had realized that what he wanted to do was build his very own mobile of voices. He began to act on his dream.

To arrange harmony layers, he would need a series of voices. In his first cousin Mike Love he found his earliest musical soulmate. From their early teens on, the two sang together, sharing a love of rock-and-roll and rhythm-and-blues. Although Brian had often encouraged both of his brothers to sing three-part harmony with him as they were growing up, he later reached the point where Carl seemed the only viable choice as an extra voice for the songs he and Mike were working on. When they recruited schoolmate Al Jardine, the original formation of the Beach Boys was born.

But there was the problem of Dennis. Brian didn't really believe that Dennis could cut it as a musician — in fact, at this early stage, Brian considered him to be little better than a thug. Dennis was good with his fists and had a quick temper, just like his father. He also had a tendency to get over it fast and not hold a grudge, often dismissing conflict by conceding, "I'm usually wrong anyway." Good at finding trouble, he would bear the nickname "Dennis the Menace" throughout much of his life.

In his mid-teens, Dennis was consumed by surfing and by racing

go-carts. He liked to hang out at Dixon Engine Rebuilding on Broadway Circle, and that is where his love for all things fast was nurtured. This performance auto garage was owned and operated by Dick Dixon's father, who also built Indy cars. "It was kind of a candy store for hot rods," says Dick. His dad helped Dennis set up his own go-cart on the premises. When it came time to put the cart through its paces, Dennis was ready. "Dennis was a qualified driver," maintains Dick, who is still involved in the street-rod scene. "Dennis was able to push the pedal to the metal. He was a guy who really had some style, and he was obviously enthused about speed. Racing was definitely in his blood." Down the road, Dennis would race cars professionally and come to own a fleet of world-class automobiles.

Dennis was also preoccupied with Hawthorne's female teen population. With Dick Dixon, he signed up for typing class just to meet girls. "Mr. Pendleton's typing class was known for having some of the finest females in the school," says Dixon. Apparently, he and Dennis were the only boys in the class, "so we both became pretty good typists and we met some nice girls." Even at the awkward age of sixteen, Dennis was already known for his ability to attract the opposite sex. "He was making love to a phenomenal amount of women when guys his own age were just dreaming of petting and kissing girls," says friend Ed Roach.

It would ultimately be Dennis's innate sex appeal that solidified the group's popularity, though for a long time no one saw its commercial potential. "Dennis was suppressed by Brian," says a childhood neighbor. "He wouldn't stand up to Brian — he was just kept in the background." As far as Brian and the others were concerned, there was no place in their plans for a square peg like Dennis. When the idea of a band was raised at the Wilson home, Murry loved it, but Audree insisted that any such project include Dennis. "God, my mom had to beat them to let me in the group," admitted Dennis. Reluctantly, Brian agreed, and the lineup was set. The year was 1961.

Before leaving on a weekend trip to Mexico, Audree and Murry provided their sons with money for food, plus a little extra for emergencies. Brian used the cash to rent musical instruments. He was longing to rehearse the material he had been writing, and he seized the opportunity to test drive his electric Four Freshmen sound. The neighborhood kids came running, and the Wilson house filled with

teenagers eager to preview an exciting, original sound. "We applied a kind of punky bubblegum sound to go with those arrangements," explained Dennis. "The duality of the two styles seemed to work."

When Mr. and Mrs. Wilson returned home, Murry blew a gasket — the boys had used up all the emergency money. Then Brian persuaded him to listen. When he'd had an earful of the new tunes they'd worked out, Murry immediately forgot about the money and started planning their future in show business. In fact, he was so impressed with what the boys had accomplished that he arranged for them to record some demos.

Out of these early recordings came the Beach Boys' very first single, which was released originally on the X label and then on Candix, a small, local label. It was called "Surfin'," and it was both very primitive in its instrumentation and a poor showcase for the boys' vocal talents. The song did, however, have a gimmick: its subject matter. Southern Californians were ripe for any product that reflected the world of surfing, and Brian's arrangement was just catchy enough to make the song an instant regional hit. Dennis recalled the moment they first heard themselves on the radio: "We were driving along in Brian's car and the DJ says, 'Here is a group from Hawthorne called the Beach Boys.' That was it — the best moment ever. We were screaming and running around telling anyone who would listen. Carl threw up. No moment could ever touch that." The song would make the band a local phenomenon and would finally climb as high as number seventy-five on the national charts. For a time, the Wilson brothers and their young friends soared in an adolescent euphoria. They had gone from being neighborhood kids to celebrities overnight.

During their earliest live performances, the Beach Boys didn't even resemble the dynamic act they would later become. Circa 1962, the neighbors would often see Dennis loading his drums into the red Ford Falcon wagon that semireliably got the band from the Hawthorne home to various teen record hops and high-school dances. They now had a reputation as hit makers to live up to, and they clearly needed a serious makeover. Dressed in matching Pendleton shirts, they would struggle through a few dance movements that Murry had choreographed. Brian was in charge, but his gawky, skinny body and obvious stage fright seriously undermined the pop-star demeanor he was shooting for. Mike Love still had his

hair, but he didn't yet possess the cocky confidence that would later become his trademark. Young Dennis was painfully shy on stage, and little Carl looked like the Pillsbury Doughboy clutching an electric guitar. Yet, despite all of this, the group somehow managed to please its early audiences. Those who saw them back then insist that there were sparks — something great was about to happen.

The Beach Boys could easily have turned out to be a short footnote in the musical history of southern California. In those days, countless local bands were releasing a single or two on independent labels. Few of these releases would be heard beyond the region, and practically all of the bands that recorded them would never be heard from again. Once the initial popularity of the Beach Boys' first release had dwindled, the momentum came to a screeching halt. After awhile, Al Jardine headed off to dentistry school and was replaced by the Wilsons' neighbor David Marks. Finally, when it looked as though the whole project was on the verge of fizzling out, Brian approached his dad and asked if he could help them out.

Murry Wilson officially took over as the boys' manager, and within weeks he had secured them a contract from Capitol Records. A combination of good timing, Murry's steely determination, and the gorgeous blend of voices that Capitol representative Nick Venet heard when he played their demo tape made the nearly impossible happen. Venet urged executive Voyle Gilmore to make Murry an offer. The teenagers from Hawthorne signed with one of the world's largest record labels.

From this point in 1962 until the end of the decade, the Beach Boys would sell millions upon millions of records for Capitol. While most major recording acts had talent, few could boast what the Beach Boys had: genius. Brian Wilson was one of a kind, and through the power of his creativity the band would be transformed into a national treasure.

So what makes Brian Wilson's music so special? Why has he been compared to the greatest composers of our time? How did an untrained musician with only one good ear come to be called a genius? The answer is both simple and complex. Simply, he put sounds together in a way that no one in pop music had ever attempted. But the story of the development of his techniques is more complicated. One way of describing that process would be to say that once Brian's

The Beach Boys sign with Capitol Records (July 16, 1962)

COURTESY LEE DEMPSEY

ability had reached full flower, around 1966, he began to adopt a classical approach to making pop records. He began to structure his compositions as a series of separate sections or movements that segued seamlessly into one another. The song "Good Vibrations" is the most famous example of this method. Brian's trademark became a sheer sophistication and an astonishing inventiveness; the way he manipulated sound is now often emulated, but in its time it was unparalleled. In the mid-sixties enormous strides were taken in the pop realm, with bands like the Beatles and producers like Phil Spector leading the charge. Yet, despite the obvious gifts of these artists, it's safe enough to say that no single influence was stronger than Brian Wilson. With his beautifully crafted work, he goaded virtually everyone else in the business, including the Beatles, to strive for a higher level of artistic achievement.

The album *Pet Sounds* is arguably the high-water mark of a century of music making. Listen again to the haunting beauty of its intricate arrangements and it will become clear to you why so many people

were confused by what they were hearing. Brian directed layers of instruments to perform melodic and percussive flights that defied what rock and roll was and is. He used brass, woodwinds, strings, theramin, accordions, and a host of other sounds foreign to the context of rock — at least people thought they were at the time. Brian's compositions were highly personal: they made you feel as though you were peering inside another person's soul. Sometimes the result was painful and at other times the effect was pure jubilation. And somehow, amid all this complexity and sophistication, the music retains a naive quality that renders it timeless.

Brian had furnished the Beach Boys with such a wealth of summertime anthems to perform that they would remain a consistent concert draw for over thirty-five years. *All Summer Long* is still one of the best evocations of a California summer ever created. Loaded with strong material like "Wendy," "Little Honda," the title track, and "Don't Back Down," the album could have spawned several hit singles, but these high-quality compositions were never to be more than album tracks.

During this period, Brian was actually so prolific that he gave away a number-one hit to Jan and Dean: "Surf City." Timeless tunes such as "California Girls" and "Help Me Rhonda" came spilling out of him: he seemed capable of issuing an endless supply of top-of-the-chart caliber songs. He experimented with the "unplugged" concept more than twenty-five years before it became so popular, and one result was his acoustic *Beach Boys Party*. In particular, that album's smash single "Barbara Ann" was a product of this pioneering effort.

When he tired of the sun-and-fun genre, which he had practically invented, Brian decided to try a more adult approach to hit making. Some members of the band and the Capitol Records people strenuously resisted the idea. Constantly having to fight for his creative freedom wore him down; the protracted struggle would finally take a huge toll on him. At first, he was able to prove everyone wrong by making the transition to more mature themes fairly easily. Major hits like "Sloop John B," "Wouldn't It Be Nice," and "Good Vibrations" kept the juggernaut advancing — to the amazement of virtually everyone except Brian. Gradually, though, the giving tree that was Brian Wilson would stop growing, and when this happened, the Beach Boys would become severely undernourished.

Brian Wilson collaborated with many lyricists over the years in an effort to compensate for his own deficiencies in this area. Mike Love furnished great lyrics for many Beach Boys hits — he was Brian's usual writing partner during the 1962–66 period. Mike penned the lyrics to "Surfin' Safari," "Fun, Fun, Fun," "Little Honda," "California Girls," "Good Vibrations," and many other major successes. He had a knack for coming up with catchy, sing-along wordplay that never betrayed a hint of introspection. Mike has said that Chuck Berry was his primary songwriting influence, and the similarity in their styles is obvious. Despite the conflicts that were to flare later between Mike and the rest of the band, it's undeniable that his sharp, youth-oriented lyrics were essential to the early popularity of the Beach Boys. In the mid-1990s, Mike Love would sue Brian Wilson, claiming that he had not been properly credited for some of the songs they had written together. Though he won the suit and was awarded a large settlement, many were quick to point out that if it hadn't been for Brian, Mike would probably have toiled his life away for a small fraction of what he earned as a Beach Boy.

Brian also wrote with LA disc jockey Roger Christian and the gifted and versatile musician Gary Usher, creating a number of well-known early-period songs. But when the time came for him to adopt a more intensely reflective style for the *Pet Sounds* project, Brian turned to a wonderful lyricist named Tony Asher. The two would only work together on this one project. Together they came up with what was probably the most perfectly realized group of songs that Brian ever put his name to. Whenever he was asked who his favorite collaborator was, Brian always named Van Dyke Parks, his main partner in creating the legendary, unreleased *Smile* LP. This project was the creative zenith of Brian's career and, apart from LSD, Parks was the force that got him there. The album's wonderful tracks have a stream-of-consciousness lyrical style; they contain multiple levels of meaning. The epic "Surfs Up" may be the single greatest song the Wilson/Parks team ever developed, but their only joint hit tune was the magical "Heroes and Villains," which even seemed strange in 1967, the strangest of years. The lyrics Parks submitted were often considered unacceptable by Mike Love and others, and the pressure of their dissent ultimately brought about the dissolution of Parks's partnership with Brian. In later years, as Brian's input decreased and

the band evolved into a more democratic unit, the group's songwriting became team oriented: all combinations of the Beach Boys wrote together. And this is when Dennis Wilson, the composer, began to emerge from the shadows.

Volumes have been written about the troubled life of Brian Wilson. So much energy was expended over the years to prevent him from harming himself and to rehabilitate him that it seems ironic he's the only Wilson who has survived: Murry died in 1973, Dennis in 1983, Audree and Carl in 1998. Brian, the one everybody was convinced would find a way to destroy himself, is still around — in a slightly altered, but seemingly healthy, state. Cracks in the armor of his delicate psyche began to appear as early as 1964. He suddenly refused to tour with the band late that year, and various reasons for that decision — ranging from fear of flying to too much pressure to produce hits to the paranoid conviction that Mike Love was having an affair with his wife — have been floated by journalists.

Another theory about his trouble centers on his charismatic brother, and this theory would help to explain Brian's attitude towards Dennis. There are some who believe it was Dennis who inadvertently nudged Brian over the precipice. "I think Dennis was very much responsible for Brian's breakdown," says filmmaker/photographer Ed Roach, who documented the band from the sixties through the time of Dennis's death. "Brian couldn't stand that Dennis got all the attention. Dennis got the adulation, and that's what drove Brian away from the stage. Brian was so much less appreciated on stage, and he really resented Dennis for it." Al Jardine's firsthand description was somewhat simpler: "He just cracked up." What it comes down to is that Brian insisted that he just couldn't take it anymore, and there has been much speculation as to what, exactly, "it" was.

Between this point and 1976, Brian did not tour with the Beach Boys. He did, however, become the finest producer in the business, and he gave the band his heart and soul in every other way. If Brian had remained the group's bass player on tour, he would never have found the time to create such wonders in the studio. So, while the Beach Boys benefited immeasurably from this situation, they were also nearly destroyed by it.

Glen Campbell was the first musician called in to replace Brian on tour. Campbell liked to go fishing with Dennis, but he didn't care

much for the screaming fans. After Bruce Johnston came onboard as a full-time Beach Boy, things settled into a smooth rhythm for quite awhile. The band would tour hard through the United States and abroad, and when they returned, Brian would be ready with the backing tracks for the next album. Because the complex arrangements had been worked out in advance, the band simply had to record the vocals, and a new Beach Boys LP would hit the stores.

The biggest drawback to all of this was that Brian and his band were growing apart. Brian was advancing both creatively and socially. He was moving in a completely different circle of friends and being influenced by a more Bohemian philosophy, one that embraced free thinking and drug use. The rest of the Boys were miles behind Brian in their interactions with what would soon be known as the counterculture. This large gulf would grow vast when Brian began recording *Smile*.

In the fall of 1966, the Beach Boys were high on another peak. Their popularity in the US continued to be solid; the new underground rock press was taking notice of them as an artistic rival of the Beatles. And in Europe, especially Great Britain, they had become even more popular than they were at home. When heavyweight British music journal *New Musical Express* published its vaunted annual reader's poll, the music world was stunned to discover that the Beatles had been overtaken for the first time since 1962. The world's new number-one group, according to the highly influential *NME*, was the Beach Boys. This was an amazing ascent, and it could not be ignored. At the same time, the finest and most popular single of the Beach Boys' entire career, "Good Vibrations," was rocketing to the top of the US and British charts. It got the jump on the whole flower-child movement by several months, and for that brief time the Beach Boys had a chance to savor what the Beatles would later taste when their undisputed masterpiece and era-defining concept album, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, was released. That album became the soundtrack for the Summer of Love, 1967, and dramatically pushed back the boundaries of popular music making. What inspired the Beatles to issue such an astounding artistic statement? Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys, of course. Upon hearing *Pet Sounds* for the first time, Paul McCartney and John Lennon sensed that the creative bar was being raised, and they responded successfully to the challenge.

Dennis in concert (1964)

HAL BLAINE COLLECTION

When the Beach Boys returned from their triumphant tour of Great Britain in late 1966, Brian was, as usual, preparing the next release. But this time when the group joined him in the studio to begin work on the vocal tracks what they heard — the nearly finished backing tracks for *Smile* — totally threw them. The tracks represented a surge in a strange new direction. The songs were avant garde to say the least, with passages that were psychedelic, even scary. Abstract arrangements were pieced together in an ever-changing pastiche of brilliance, bordering on lunacy. Not your typical Beach Boys record.

One of these incredible pieces was "Cabinessence," an eerie example of Brian's drug-induced vision featuring an oboe-driven mantra and raga-influenced fuzztone colored sections. Another brilliant but terrifying tune was "Mrs. O'Learys Cow," also called "Fire"; here, the music itself seems alive — flames crackle and roar, burning everything in their path. It's a fascinating expression of a tormented soul, and it draws you right inside. "Surf's Up" is deeply beautiful and

painful with its stellar arrangement and lyrics — it sends chills through the listener. If *Smile* had actually been released as scheduled in the spring of 1967, the history of rock and roll would surely have developed differently. Not only would *Smile* have diluted the novelty of *Sgt. Pepper*, but the Beach Boys would also have been remembered as having blown the mind of every hippie from San Francisco to London. This music still seems awesomely progressive. No one has ever created anything as unusual in its context as *Smile*.

But *Smile* was never released and (reportedly) never completed. Most of the other band members discouraged Brian from pursuing this musical direction: they feared that their audience would find it too weird to handle. Mike Love questioned the meaning of Van Dyke Parks's lyrics. Even Carl was unhappy with the project. Dennis was, for the most part, the lone voice within the group supporting Brian.

While Brian countered that *Smile* would find an audience and succeed on the basis of its artistic merit, he soon tired of having to fight to see his masterpiece through. The sessions fell apart, and so did Brian. Drug consumption continued to dominate his lifestyle, and he began to shun the responsibility of serving as the catalyst for the Beach Boys' creativity. That summer, he pulled the group out of the Monterey Pop Festival, and within months the Beach Boys had plummeted from their position as leaders of the new-music scene to enter the ranks of the has-beens.

Though Brian went on making solid contributions to the group over the next few years, his input decreased steadily. By the time the LP *Friends* appeared, in late 1968, the Beach Boys were generating such a low level of interest that few people noticed an interesting development: the release marked the first occasion that each member of the band had contributed original compositions to a project. Particularly surprising was "Little Bird," a shining burst of beauty and strength, written and sung by Dennis, who for so long had been obscured by his big brother's shadow.

4 HARDWORKING DRUMMER

One electric moment on the multimillion-selling *Beach Boys Concert* LP, released in 1964, occurs when Mike Love steps to the microphone and says, "Here he is, the hardworkin' drummer, Denny Wilson, to sing a song!" The girls in the audience start screaming like the citizens of Tokyo confronted with Godzilla for the first time. Dennis rips into a somewhat off-key, but nonetheless sincere, version of Dion's "The Wanderer," and the pure exuberance of his delivery makes for an unforgettable minute and thirty-one seconds. His appeal is obvious as he unleashes that rare mix of swaggering sexual energy and awkward innocence. What he's managed to do is take his brief moment in the spotlight and launch an already airborne concert into the stratosphere. Later, when the band slows things down to execute an amazingly tight harmony blend on the Four Freshmen classic "Graduation Day," Dennis again steals the moment by chiming in with the final note from his perch way back on the drum riser — off microphone, no less.

This album hails from the Beach Boys' "striped shirt" period — it stands as a document of a versatile and fun-loving unit. With Brian still front and center, the live Beach Boys were a garage/surf/hot-rod band with vocal ability like no one else in rock.

As the years passed and the Beach Boys' popularity shot up, slid down, and hovered somewhere in between, one thing remained constant. When Dennis Wilson took the microphone for his usual one song per set, it was the highlight of the night for a large portion of the audience. In his early thirties, to a gentle piano accompaniment,

he'd deliver his signature rendition of "You Are So Beautiful," and young girls would simply melt. Flowers tossed by his throngs of female admirers would shower the stage as he brought the house down — night after night, city after city. In the glitz and glamour era of mid-to-late-seventies stadium concerts — when the other Beach Boys would deck themselves out in silk, satin, or gold lamé — Dennis would stride to center stage wearing a sweat-soaked cotton T-shirt and jeans to say "God bless you" to the average working-class fan. Anyone who witnessed one of these shows finds it hard to forget the spectacle of Dennis touching fifty thousand souls with his smile.

One ardent Dennis Wilson fan, after a San Jose, California concert in 1963, resolved to touch him back. While the packed auditorium screamed its collective lungs out through "Surfin' Safari," "Surfer Girl," "In My Room," and "Little Deuce Coupe," Chris Duffy was contriving a way to meet Dennis and the Beach Boys. She had noticed a shiny new Corvette parked behind the hall and jumped to the conclusion that it was Denny's. She stationed herself next to the vehicle, hoping her hunch would pay off. It did. When the show ended, Dennis sprinted for his precious car followed by a stream of fleet and eager girls. "I was standing by Denny's car door, and as he climbed into his car I shook his hand and told him he was great," remembers Chris. Brian appeared, and she greeted him, too. "Denny and Brian were really nice. They were mobbed with fans yet they still took the time to say hi." Twenty years later, during the last summer of his life, Dennis found out about a new fan club that had been established in his honor by the very girl who had staked out his car years earlier. Chris Duffy's Friends of Dennis Wilson fan club and *Dennymania* newsletter are now in their seventeenth year.

Dennis Wilson's musical contribution to the Beach Boys' body of work was mainly in three areas: he served as drummer, vocalist, and composer. While he played drums on the studio recordings of most of the early hits, session pro Hal Blaine handled much of the studio work from late 1963 until 1967; but the fact remains that Dennis did play drums or percussion on a significant number of the Beach Boys' Capitol-period recordings, despite rumors to the contrary. After badly injuring his hand, Dennis was replaced by Ricky Fataar for a couple of years in the early seventies, but he resumed his position as the Beach Boys' drummer in 1974. (Besides Fataar, two other drum-

mers would occasionally fill in for Dennis: Mike Kowalski and Bobby Figueroa.) For the most part, though, Dennis was the concert drummer from 1961 until 1983, although there were absences due to injury and to drug- and alcohol-related incidents.

Dennis added keyboards to several Beach Boys recordings and took to the piano during many of the band's concerts. He loved to show off his honky-tonk abilities by performing "Help Me Rhonda," among other tunes. Eventually, Dennis would develop into an excellent piano player. He'd sometimes dabble in guitar picking as well, but Beach Boys fans will always remember him as a drummer.

Nearly every Beach Boys record issued between 1961 and 1980 features Dennis's vocals. His voice enriches practically every hit the band had. He covered lead vocals years before Carl Wilson or Al Jardine did — he was the lead singer on over twenty Beach Boys album tracks. As early as the group's first album session, in August of 1962, Dennis was given a solo vocal. It was on "Little Girl (You're My Miss America)," and though he would never be as technically proficient a vocalist as most of his bandmates, his singing did have a unique earthy quality to it. His vocal efforts added a little welcome roughness to the sweet surroundings of the Boys' sound. When the three Wilson brothers harmonized in unison the results had that otherworldly effect that only siblings can achieve. The background vocals on "Don't Worry Baby" are a perfect example of that rich, powerful sound that Brian, Dennis, and Carl could produce by blending their voices.

Even more impressive than his contributions as a vocalist or a musician were Dennis's offerings as a songwriter. In this capacity, he did what is probably his finest work as a Beach Boy, yet most people are unaware of it: by the time he was writing songs for the band on a regular basis, the Beach Boys' popularity was on the wane; and though many of Dennis's tunes remain fan favorites, he never received credit for composing a major hit.

During the surf and hot-rod years, Dennis was the epitome of the primitive rock musician. He had little training, marginal natural ability, but loads of spirit and heart. His drumming technique was unorthodox and tremendously erratic during those first couple of years, but he was still one of the band's vital assets. When Dennis and his brothers found a feel they could hang with, they cooked, and

soon the Beach Boys had created the surf vehicle against which all others would forever be judged — the *Surfin' USA* LP. The album is the most complete existing document of the original band, in all of its 1963 bare-bones glory. On the *Surfin' USA* version of "Miserlou," Dennis battles through the Latin/surf classic as his tempo surges and falters, but the overall effect is garage perfection. As Carl and Brian engage in some staccato picking — à la Dick Dale, on guitar and bass respectively — Dennis adds a guttural dimension to bring the song to its most basic level. On the LP's raucous instrumental, "Surf Jam," the three brothers again step on the accelerator and peel out with their instruments smoking. Like a Native American thumping a piece of stretched leather, Dennis and his brothers prepare to hit the warpath. Dennis's playful hot-rod fills nicely punctuate his drumming on the classic "Shut Down," as he tosses flashes of his personality into the mix.

Listening to the massively popular *Surfer Girl* LP from the same year, you'll hear Dennis delivering some competent but less memorable drumming. Here, it's his vocals that really stand out. On the classic title cut, the brotherly blend is sensational, with Dennis taking the middle harmony that provides a foundation for Brian's falsetto. On the similarly structured "In My Room," the three Wilsons harmonize just the way they did as children, with Brian, then Carl, then Dennis stepping in, one by one. Dennis is the lead singer on the spirited "Surfers Rule," which, in its closing moments, seems to goad the Four Seasons. Mike sings lead on "Little Deuce Coupe," and Dennis adds the follow-up solo line — "Little deuce coupe, you don't know what I got" — to each chorus.

It was for this tune that Brian first asked Dennis to relinquish his position on drums to Hal Blaine. Afterwards, Brian apparently felt some pangs of guilt over his decision and tried to make up for it by giving Dennis a prominent vocal part instead. The song would become a smash single. Blaine recalls that there were never any hard feelings on Dennis's part about the switch and that he and Dennis always considered themselves to be friends. "We had a lot in common," says Blaine. "We both loved motorcycles, we both loved boats, and we both were drummers. Having me play on the records gave him more time to chase girls and play with his toys instead of working in the studio all day." The fact that Dennis always took full advantage of

that freedom endeared him to Blaine: "Dennis was wonderful. You know, through the years, people always asked me, 'Didn't Dennis get mad because you were playing on the records?' I tried to tell them I would make thirty-five dollars in the afternoon and Dennis would make thirty-five thousand that night. Dennis had his lifestyle — you know, he was the only real Beach Boy. Dennis loved the fact that I played drums and he didn't have to mess with it. In fact, when Dennis did his own album he hired me!"

A Beach Boys concert appearance filmed in March 1964 for closed-circuit television now serves as a fascinating document of the band's early style. All of the Boys look handsome and fit. Dennis and Brian show off their glorious pompadours, created for them by Hollywood hairstylist Jay Sebring. Brian's legendary stage fright is painfully apparent — he is very tentative, and he's obviously having trouble hearing all of the instruments. At one point, during "In My Room," he keeps glancing over at Carl, and his terrified expression telegraphs the plea, "Help! Get me out of here!" But then a mood shift occurs — on some of the up-tempo numbers he actually appears to be enjoying himself. A still slightly shy-looking Dennis does some explosive drumming on "Surfin' USA," "Shut Down," and several of the other rockers. Throughout the show, Dennis's joyous playing vitalizes the instrumental lineup. While the other band members utilize their collector's-dream Fender instruments professionally and competently (Mike even delivers a few primitive saxophone honks), it is Dennis who throws himself most energetically into the performance, who incites reaction, and who comes away with his rock-and-roll credentials intact.

In April of 1964, the Beach Boys appeared on Steve Allen's television show. Before a mostly adult studio audience, they dished up a solid performance, but one lacking in excitement. As they launched into their latest single, "Fun, Fun, Fun," Brian turned to Dennis and barked, "Pick it up!" Looking slightly befuddled, Dennis endeavored to please his brother. Part of the music-related problem that existed between Brian and Dennis was that Brian, on the one hand, liked to push the beat of a song and always seems to be out in front of the groove. Dennis, on the other hand, liked to hang back inside the feel and come down on the backside of the groove.

When Brian started bringing in Hal Blaine, Blaine gave Brian

Dennis was often left out of the harmony blend in concert

KEITH REEVES ARCHIVE

what he wanted, and, because he was such a talented musician, Blaine could still give the music the solid-in-the-pocket groove that Dennis liked. Ultimately, Dennis learned how to do this himself, because he was obliged to emulate in concert what Blaine had laid down in the studio. "That could be the case," says the modest Blaine, playing down his influence. "Dennis got a little older and his playing matured. He eventually found his style." Down the road, Dennis would be respected as a practitioner of basic rock drumming, and much of the credit for this evolution should go to Hal Blaine.

Later in 1964, when the Beach Boys appeared on the teen television showcase *Shindig!*, their performance of "Fun, Fun, Fun" had a completely different flavor. Mike Love performed the stiffest version imaginable of the jerk dance, and the band's newfound confidence was palpable. This time, Dennis nailed the groove with such authority that Brian could only go along with it. The solidity and power of Dennis's backbeat was reminiscent of the steadiness of Rolling Stones drummer Charlie Watts. The band had made an impressive leap forward in just a few months.

Dennis was physically powerful, and the strength of his body fed his drumming style. He abused his drums, but not in a theatrical way like the Who's Keith Moon. Dennis simply beat the crap out of his drums. Bobby Figueroa, who performed with the Beach Boys for many years, says that Dennis "could actually break a snare drum with a single strike. He was like a canon going off." Recalls Hal Blaine, "Brian would have me play on a session, and Dennis would ask me if he could use my drums afterward on another session or a demo. He used to pound the drums so hard he would leave terrible welts on my drumheads." Blaine laughs at the memory. "Whenever Dennis used one of my sets, my drum tech would have to change all the heads."

On most of the up-tempo material, Dennis would hit the snare with his right hand, which is backwards for a right-handed person. "Most drummers play the high hat with their right hand, but Dennis did the opposite," explains Ricky Fataar. Some have said that this unorthodox habit was the result of an early injury to his left hand, but Blaine thinks that Dennis did it to achieve a little extra pop. "He probably had more power in his right hand — he just loved to play hard," says Blaine, who extends this notion to describe Dennis's entire being: "It was always balls to the wall with him."

Another classic Beach Boys television appearance took place in April of 1964. They performed a lip-synch version of their new record "Don't Worry Baby" on Dick Clark's *American Bandstand*. For this particular broadcast, Clark adhered to a Beatles-only theme, playing Fab Four music exclusively for the dancing pleasure of the teen studio audience. Then on came the Beach Boys. Thrown into the path of the British Invasion, they somehow managed to emerge looking good. The studio audience was obviously delighted to witness America's most popular teen singing group at close range. After they'd run through their song, Clark did individual introductions, and a few starstruck females in the audience started to quiver when he spoke Dennis's name. Mentioning that the band had just returned from an Australian tour, Clark asked the Boys if they'd gone surfing Down Under. Carl tried to explain that they'd been too busy, and Brian and Mike shrank into the woodwork. Just when it seemed as though the nation's premier surfing group would be revealed as not knowing one end of a board from the other, Dennis piped up, relieving the pressure. "Yes, I went surfing there," he told Clark. "They had a

newsreel following me around. They wanted to see an American surfer." When Clark wanted to know how the waves were, Dennis calmly stated, "I was surprised, but it wasn't that good." The other Beach Boys looked like they'd just dodged a few bullets. Dennis's surfer-boy credentials had saved the day. If it had been demonstrated on national television that the Beach Boys were nothing more than a bunch of impostors, they might have become the 1964 equivalent of Milli Vannilli. Still, they weren't home free: Clark went on to ask Al Jardine what the name of the new Beach Boys album was. Jardine didn't know.

With 1964's *Shut Down, Volume 2* LP, the Beach Boys again delivered several instant classics. "The Warmth of the Sun" is one of the most beautiful songs the band ever recorded, and it features a great group vocal blend. Brian's soaring falsetto is nothing short of awe inspiring on both this tune and the epochal "Don't Worry Baby." Dennis contributes his one and only drum solo, "Denny's Drums," to the project; he would have been the first to admit that he was by no means a soloist type of drummer, and here, where he is completely out of his element, the results are mixed. In a somewhat halting manner, he explores a couple of styles, but by mid-solo, with the engine of his natural exuberance, he has managed to push into more interesting territory. A better showcase for Dennis is his vocal performance on the up-tempo "This Car of Mine." When given the opportunity to sing, he could consistently turn in spirited and genuine-sounding work, even if the material he was given wasn't the best. Unfortunately, his range fell right into the same register as Mike Love's, and Mike almost always laid claim to the top-quality material. It's surprising that Dennis garnered as many singing assignments as he did in those early days, because Love had a dominant, egocentric personality, and once his voice had been established as a signature sound of the group the pattern for the immediate future was set. Yet Brian was creative and smart enough to know that changing things around once in awhile made things more interesting: before long, every Beach Boy had been lead singer on at least one major hit.

The Beach Boys' worldwide popularity became so potent in 1964 that Murry Wilson would brag about them to whomever he could make listen. Kim Fowley, who would later become famous as an LA-based record producer, encountered the brash father of the

The door to fame and fortune was wide open — The Beach Boys with a happy fan (1964)

ROACHCLIPS ARCHIVE

Wilson boys in England during that year. "He went to great lengths to tell me his band was so popular that the teenage girls in the audience wet themselves on the theater seats. He maintained that after the Beach Boys performed the smell of urine was so intense they had to tear the seats out and replace them with new upholstery. He went on to explain that this was the true gauge if a band was a phenomenon or not." Murry's intense relationship with his sons reached the boiling point while they were on the road. His ongoing attempts to control his boys were becoming more than they could tolerate, and by 1964 they had begun to see their father as an obstacle.

So, the Beach Boys officially fired Murry Wilson as their manager. The strain of touring and the pressure to create hit records had intensified the friction that had always been there. Now twenty-two years old, Brian, especially, found himself unwilling to put up with Murry's less than diplomatic behavior, and he just didn't want to be

told what to do by anyone — especially his dad. Recording sessions would often turn into shouting matches between Murry and Brian. It was routine for the senior Wilson to question his eldest son's artistic decisions.

When the vocals for the band's next single were in the process of being recorded, Murry berated Dennis for his lack of concentration. Brian angrily ordered his father to leave the session. It was soon after this incident that Murry was relieved of his managerial duties. He would still handle the publishing end of the Beach Boys operation, but having his responsibilities diminished in this way came as a huge blow to the emotional Murry, and he reportedly became quite depressed. The frustrated songwriter turned famous father had given his all to the Beach Boys, and he was convinced that without him the band would be in trouble. And he wasn't the only one who felt that way. Some other Beach Boys insiders consider Murry's firing to mark the beginning of the group's eventual downfall. "Murry loved the group. The only thing he loved more than the group was his sons," says Fred Vail (who was given his first job by Murry). "They thought they would continue to sell millions of records without Murry, and for awhile they did, but after Murry, no one fought for them out of love. The replacement management fought for them because it was their job, and that is a very big difference."

Through the summer of 1964, American AM airwaves were dominated by the British Invasion sound — but, just as they had the summer before, the Beach Boys maintained a very strong position in the midst of the foreign assault. "I Get Around" burned up the singles charts, hitting number one, and the Beach Boys were invited to appear on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. On the Sullivan stage, surrounded by several hot rods, they performed their smash hit, raising their profile to even greater heights. As the studio monitors flashed a close-up of Dennis, the girls in the audience began to shriek. The young drummer responded by breaking into a wide grin.

On the heels of the megasuccess of "I Get Around," the band released one of its strongest LPS ever: *All Summer Long*. Though Dennis was now only a part-time drummer on the recording sessions, he was getting a great deal of vocal exposure on the band's releases. He kicks things off in motorbike rave-up "Little Honda" by yelling "Go!" During the session, some insisted that Dennis's shouting was

over the top, but Denny held firm. Now it seems that "Little Honda" would be diminished without it. When he intones a throaty "Faster!" in each chorus, the band answers back, "It's all right," and the momentum builds steadily. On the gorgeous "Hushabye," the brothers hit their heavenly stride; Brian, Dennis, and Carl blend their voices to create yet another powerful wall of harmony. Mike and Al also add great vocals to this arrangement, which has to be one of the all-time perfect sing-your-kid-to-sleep songs. The testosterone-charged "Don't Back Down" features Hal Blaine on the drums — his memorable series of bass-drum thumps propels the song's takeoff.

As the Beach Boys' recorded sound became increasingly sophisticated, the recording process grew proportionately. Throughout the recording of *All Summer Long*, the band put in long and difficult hours to achieve the intricate pyramid of harmonies that Brian had conceived. On archive tapes we hear an exhausted Dennis imploring Brian to call it a day. "Sleep is very important," he ventures, but he is ignored and the taping continues. On the vocal overdubs for "Wendy," Brian is heard chastising Dennis for not reading the lyric properly. As another attempt is made at the song, Dennis snaps, "My brother was a teenage faggot!"

Along with the contentious banter, there was also discussion of real-life issues. During the same "Wendy" vocal session, Dennis and Mike can be heard talking about "the clap." When Dennis warns Mike that "it could ruin us all," Mike replies, "It won't do shit." Life on the road involved dealing with constant temptation in the form of a phenomenon soon to be known as "the groupie." For Dennis and some of the others, sex with strangers became routine. Dennis may have symbolized sex to Beach Boys fans, but it wasn't just part of his image. It was — and the same may be said of his surfing and hot-rodding — an essential component of who he was. The real man and the lifestyle symbols merged.

One of the most perfect uses of Dennis's sexy voice was in the song "The Girls on the Beach." As the complex group arrangement winds through Brian's fine melody, the song builds and then suddenly breaks midway through for a solo by Dennis. His soulful, even syrupy, "The sun in her hair, the warmth of the air" is both pleading and nostalgic. Then the entire group jumps back in to conclude a song that is one of the band's finest moments.

That summer, the Beatles played the Hollywood Bowl. Dennis showed up to enjoy the fab sounds with a date — Melody Patterson, who played the sexy Wrangler Jane on television's *F Troop* — and caused quite a stir among the screaming Beatles fans.

After the massive commercial success of *All Summer Long*, the Beach Boys could have easily coasted into the next year, but Brian would have none of that. Instead, he skillfully supervised the release of two more tremendously popular LPs: *The Beach Boys Concert*, which held the top position on the *Billboard* charts for over a month; and *The Beach Boys Christmas Album*, which became a perennial favorite and contained the ultimate holiday hot-rod tune, "Little Saint Nick." Amazingly, two more smash Beach Boys singles were also released before the year's end. The first of these, "When I Grow Up to Be a Man," was a highly sophisticated piece of pop magic. Its introspective subject matter was embellished with a beautiful harpsichord-driven backing track and a tasteful Hal Blaine drum performance. Dennis energetically anchors Blaine's part with a rocking bass- and snare-drum pulse that is placed deep in the mix. Over this rich bed of sound are layered those intriguing vocal stunts that only the Beach Boys can provide. Again, Mike handles most of the lead, while Brian deploys his solid falsetto and Dennis enhances the hook with his soulful twist of the word "be." Dennis's vocals lend a subtle but pervasive flavor that somehow makes the entire tune stick in your mind.

The other hit single that rounded out an astonishing year for the band was "Dance, Dance, Dance." Brian had decided that he wanted to inject a little more rock and roll into the group's sound, and so on the next few singles he would concentrate on making this happen. Recorded in August, "Dance, Dance, Dance," which was destined to become a top-five single, featured Dennis on drums and Hal Blaine on sleighbells, mallets, castanets, and other percussive seasoning. The song had an exciting feel, and when the Beach Boys tackled it in the live setting it became a fiery adrenaline rush. The rollicking number was usually played at a faster pace in concert, and Dennis's drums were often more prominent than they are in the studio version. When the Boys toured in late 1964 with "Dance, Dance, Dance" in their set list, it became clear that this would be one of the most exciting rockers they would ever perform. The fact that the

band rarely, if ever, performed it during later concert tours is perplexing — its audience appeal is so obvious.

The Beach Boys appeared on the Christmas segment of *Shindig!* in December of 1964. Deftly performing their holiday hit "Little Saint Nick" in their striped shirts, the Boys positively glowed: they were superstars, and they were on top of the world. After "Nick," they lit into the rocking one-two punch "Pa-Pa-Oom Mow-Mow" and "Johnny B. Goode." The *Shindig!* cameras became so mesmerized by Dennis that by the third song his closeup commanded the television screen for as much time as various shots of the rest of the band combined. He was so clearly having a great time — he positively radiated innocent exuberance.

The Beach Boys were now riding the crest of their initial wave of success, and though they would see many more peaks, nothing would be quite like this. With four top-ten singles (including one in the number-one position) and four top-ten albums (also including a number one), the Boys ended their banner year. While 1964 will always be remembered as the year Beatlemania swept the world, it was also the year the Beach Boys defied the odds and achieved white-hot popularity.

For the band's next single, Brian wanted to extend the up-tempo rock feel of the previous release. The song was to be a remake of the Bobby Freeman classic "Do You Wanna Dance?" and it represented a departure from a tried-and-true formula. For the first time, a Beach Boys single would not feature Mike or Brian on lead vocals. Unpredictably, Brian chose Dennis to sing the rocking new arrangement he had created, and the pressure was on. Dennis had to deliver a hit. If the song bombed, Mike was guaranteed to say, "I told you so." Dennis, of course, delivered. He executed a vital solo vocal, and the song became a big hit in the spring of 1965. "Do You Wanna Dance?" was beautifully produced, and it was instantly recognizable as Beach Boys music. It proved that, if given a chance, Dennis Wilson could do what Mike Love had been doing — and, arguably, do it just as well. The song lingered in the top twenty for over a month, rising to number twelve. On the picture sleeve of the 45, Dennis is out in front of his bandmates; his shirt is half off, and he appears to be inviting the prospective female customer to dance. Most such customers likely wanted to do more than just dance with him.

That spring, the Beach Boys made a return *Shindig!* appearance, performing "Do You Wanna Dance?" in front of an enthusiastic teenage audience. With Dennis pounding his drums and tossing his long hair from side to side, the energy level soared. As the camera moved in for the closeup, the studio audience went crazy. With Dennis on lead vocals — thanks to the very perceptive Brian — the Beach Boys had become rougher, rowdier, and definitely sexier. So why was Dennis never given a chance to duplicate this success? Because first the other band members had to be given their chance: Carl turned out to be the best singer; Mike still needed his lead-singing fix; and by the time it should have been Dennis's turn again, the era of the hit song had passed for the Beach Boys. "Do You Wanna Dance?" remains a staple of oldies radio — any day you may find yourself driving along with the radio on and suddenly Dennis Wilson's shining moment will come blasting out over the airways.

The LP *Beach Boys Today* — released on the heels of "Do You Wanna Dance?" — demonstrates Brian Wilson's rapid growth as both a composer and a producer. It is filled with first-rate material, like "Good to My Baby," "Don't Hurt My Little Sister," and "She Knows Me Too Well," all of which have an even more progressive sound than Brian's previous recordings. The track entitled "I'm So Young" is fantastically produced, with an echo-muffled guitar descent and passionate Brian Wilson lead vocals. Dennis is clearly heard singing "Can't marry no one" in a slightly flat manner during the song's fade-out.

On the haunting "Kiss Me Baby," Brian's arranging and production skills are in full flower. A soft vocal line and a chorused guitar effect alternates with Hal Blaine's solid back beat; Brian delivers powerful and highly emotional vocals, moving the listener. Mike displays his greatest asset — his wonderful bass singing — on the chorus, and Dennis, in his magical romantic style, deploys the lyric "tight" to complete a perfect cocktail. The song is teenage bliss, and it still sends chills up the spine thirty plus years later. On the extremely complex "In the Back of My Mind," Dennis is solo vocalist, but he seems slightly overwhelmed by this *Pet Sounds*-esque mini-masterpiece. He pulls off certain passages smoothly, and his performance retains its usual earnest charm, but the odd strained line and the fact that Brian double tracked his voice diminish what could have been a classic

moment. Reportedly, Brian was not happy with Dennis's singing on this tune, which could explain why Dennis wasn't often assigned to the more complex material that would follow.

Soon the next Beach Boys hit, "Help Me Rhonda," would be heard around the world. After Brian had included the tune on *Beach Boys Today*, he decided to rerecord it in a punchier form, and his instinct was right on. This is one of the first examples of Brian tweaking a song until he was happy with it; later examples include such manipulated classics as "Good Vibrations," "Heroes and Villains," and the *Smile* tracks. All are the stuff of legend. "Help Me Rhonda" is an excellent track, featuring Al on lead vocals; Mike adds some memorable bass singing. The backing track has a carnivalesque atmosphere, with a piano solo followed by a quick electric blast of Carl's twelve-string. After shooting to the top of the charts, the song entered the category of the band's best-loved hits.

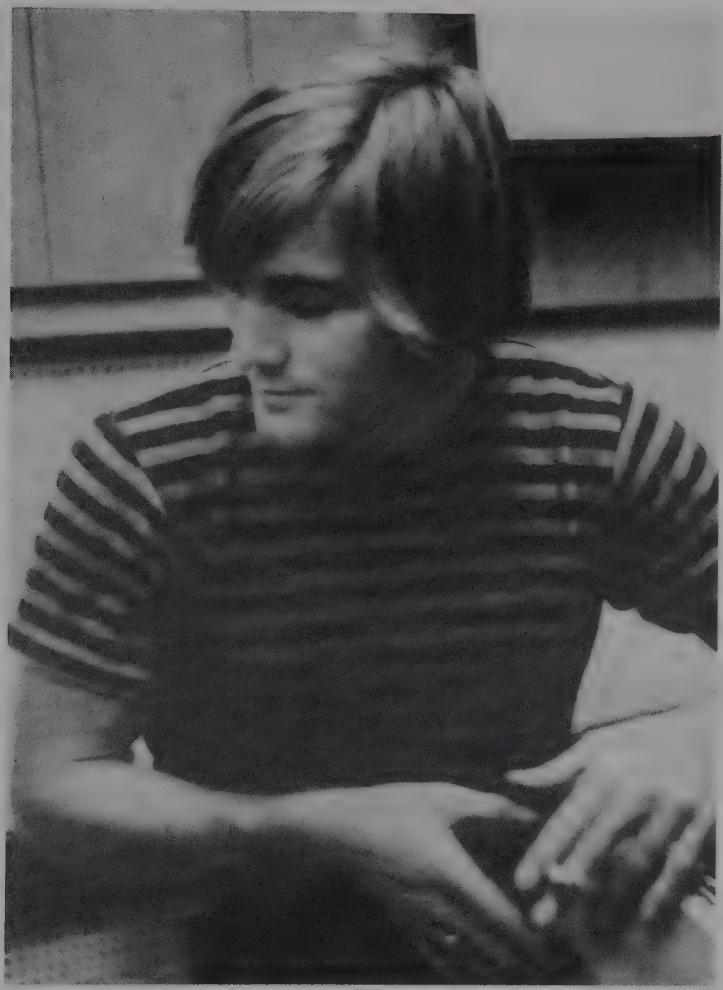
When I listened to the tapes of the recording session for this track, I realized how chaotic the situation had been. While Brian tries to coach the others through the various background parts he has arranged for them, Murry arrives and things devolve into a family fight. Barking out orders, Murry proceeds to accuse band members of being "big-headed." Al Jardine takes the brunt of this hectoring, as Murry tells him, over and over, "Come on Al, loosen up." Each time he says it you can feel Al getting a little tighter. Murry informs Brian that his voice is "shrill," tells Dennis he's singing flat, and then tries to recruit Mike to his side. Brian eventually invites his dad to leave the studio and proceeds to create one of rock's best-known records.

The Beach Boys played a memorable set at the Hollywood Bowl in July of 1965. Brian appeared onstage with them. Dino, Desi, and Billy opened the concert, inaugurating a long personal and professional relationship between the Beach Boys and guitarist/vocalist Billy Hinsche. The gig was a huge boost for DD&B, who were just getting started in the business. "They took us on the road after that. We did Bakersfield, Fresno, and Hawaii," says Hinsche. Bruce Johnston joined the Beach Boys for the road dates, and Brian retreated to the studio again to resume work on that string of hit records which now extended back three years. The next LP, *Summer Days (And Summer Nights!)*, would contain another instant Brian Wilson classic: "California Girls." This timeless song boasts one of pop

music's all-time great openings then shifts into a relaxed, almost country and western, feel. The buoyant tune builds joyfully, weaving in fabulous melodies and harmonies. Singing lead, Mike does his girls-of-the-world recitation, pointing out that the girls of the Golden State, of course, rule.

Dennis had a new California girl in his life. A stunning eighteen-year-old beauty, Carole Freedman had been born in Michigan and raised in Los Angeles. She had already been through a divorce and had a one-year-old son named Scott. Ignoring the warnings of those who said they were too young and that it was too soon, on July 29, 1965, Dennis and Carole were married. Dennis had fallen deeply in love with Carole, but some say his love for Scott was the clincher. He adopted the little boy and would forever treat him as if he was of his own blood. The couple later had a second child, a daughter named Jennifer, and they all lived happily together in their Benedict Canyon home — for an idyllic, fleeting moment. Their several-acre spread included stables for their horses and plenty of room for Dennis's growing collection of pets. In a letter published in the *Dennymania* fanzine, Carole remembers, "At one point we had seven different dogs, eleven cats, two otters, pheasants, two horses, and a Shetland pony." Dennis was at the peak of his teen-idol phase at that point, and though he cared for his family a great deal, fidelity wasn't his strong suit. Carole and Dennis's marriage would only last a little over two years.

"California Girls" hit number three in late summer 1965, and it has become one of the definitive pop-cultural expressions of our times. The Beach Boys appeared on Jack Benny's television show to promote the single, performing a live vocal over the prerecorded backing track. The set was adorned with bikini-clad chicks and custom cars; band members sported their hippest California attire. Brian, in his red-and-white-striped surfer shirt, looked stoned, and he sang a little off-key. Mike wore a Carnaby Street-style gold-striped button-down shirt with a vest and a cap to cover his rapidly balding head. Dennis opted for a nearly florescent orange T-shirt and matching surfer-dude-length shorts; his just-back-from-the-beach glow and sun-bleached, shaggy hair set off the ensemble. On the telecast, the Boys also did a brief comedy skit with both Benny and Bob Hope. Despite his condition, Brian proved to have the best comic timing of



In the studio, smoking on the bongos (1965)

COURTESY CHRIS DUFFY

any of his bandmates — by far. When comfortable and confident, Brian is an incredibly funny fellow.

Other highlights of *Summer Days (And Summer Nights!)* are the rocking "You're So Good to Me," Al Jardine's rendition of the Phil Spector classic "Then I Kissed Her," and Brian's slap at Murry titled "I'm Bugged at My Old Man." Finally, Carl was given a chance to show off his wonderful voice: he does a perfect job on the Beatles-like "Girl Don't Tell Me." From this point on, Brian would actively

explore the potential of Carl's vocal gift. In a band encompassing many strong and unique voices, Carl's was the finest. His gentle, soulful singing would prove to be the perfect instrument for the band's impending style shift. "Girl Don't Tell Me" also features a tasteful drum performance by Dennis, who seems to be making the most of a rare opportunity to play on a studio recording.

Also included on this album is the romantic "Let Him Run Wild," which Dennis claimed was his own favorite Brian Wilson song. A moody evocation of the trials and tribulations of love, it is a fitting tune for Dennis to be enamored of: Brian might well have written it about him. In the album's liner notes, Brian explains that Dennis had fallen asleep in his camper outside the studio and missed his chance to sing a lead vocal on the record. It's not hard to imagine this happening. The fast-living Denny was probably too busy enjoying himself to sleep when he should have. His relentless pursuit of good times would often make him professionally delinquent, but who could blame him? His calling was to live out all of our fantasies.

While Brian and Carl spent most of their time indoors, Dennis ricocheted from one adventure to the next. His early love for surfing and the ocean never waned, and he continued to pursue every water-related activity going. He also developed into a first-rate snow skier and would pull off death-defying stunts that would leave more sensible types shaking their heads in disbelief. Bruce Johnston remembers that on a break from an early Beach Boys tour of Canada, Dennis became bored with the established expert runs and hired a helicopter to drop him off on a mountainside that few would dare attempt to negotiate on skis. When everyone from the helicopter pilot to the local ski pros warned him that he would likely kill himself, Dennis laughed and skied away. Hours later, after he'd experienced enough thrills for one day, he rejoined the band — unharmed.

As 1965 came to an end, the Boys embarked on one of their most unusual projects. The idea was to simulate a casual party atmosphere in which to record raw, spontaneous versions of some of their favorite tunes. They would cover the songs of Bob Dylan, the Beatles, the Everly Brothers, and even some of their own material, in a sometimes irreverent manner. The LP *Beach Boys Party* was like nothing else on the market at the time, and it thoroughly confused many of those who heard it. Many more failed to recognize the innovative

nature of the original unplugged rock recording and branded the offering lightweight and foolish. Well, it did have a silly element to it, but that's part of the fun. One poignant moment comes as Dennis sings an especially moving rendition of the John Lennon classic "You've Got to Hide Your Love Away." No one else in the band could have pulled this one off — Dennis just makes the song his own.

The album's big hit was "Barbara Ann," and it rocketed to the number-two position. It remains an oldies-rock standby. Dean Torrence of Jan and Dean helped out on lead vocals for this party rocker (and thereby gave a little something back to Brian, to whom they were indebted for a certain amount of their success). The package in which Capitol presented *Beach Boys Party* is one of the most attractive ever issued for the band. Its glorious orange cover design contains a photo montage of the Boys in a party setting. The gatefold package, a rarity in 1965, includes an insert of perforated photographs. On the back cover is a shirtless Dennis cuddling Carole — his pre-Nautilus physique is truly impressive, and Carole is an equally striking figure, with her long dark hair and deep brown eyes. The sexual chemistry smolders. The fan magazines of the era buzzed about the semi-shocking nature of this now-tame image, much, no doubt, to Capitol's satisfaction.

As Brian's composing, arranging, and production skills intensified, he put the crowning touch on 1965 with the Boys' most eclectic single yet, a two-and-a-half minute tribute to his wife's coming of age. "The Little Girl I Once Knew" employs all of the trademark Beach Boys tricks, and a few new ones are thrown in for good measure. Highly original instrument combinations bounce around, generating a kaleidoscope of sound, but the song contains one very arresting element: silence. For what seems like an eternity — several seconds — there is absolutely nothing. In the context of sixties pop, it was like falling into a black hole in the middle of a stroll through the park. It was brilliant, but too strange. It seemed certain that this oddity would hold an otherwise catchy song back, but somehow, by December of 1965, it had scaled the charts to number twenty.

Los Angeles radio legend Rodney Bingenheimer recalls attending the "Little Girl" recording session and afterwards being whisked away in Dennis's gleaming red Ferrari, which had once been the prized possession of Sam Cooke, the great soul singer, who had been

mysteriously killed the year before. Dennis loved Cooke's singing and while driving would often listen to his work with tears in his eyes, but on this sunny day his choice reflected an extreme lightness of spirit. "Dennis had Lesley Gore's 'Sunshine, Lollipops, and Rainbows' blasting on the tape player, really loud," says Bingenheimer. The two cruised all the way to Dennis's Benedict Canyon home, where Bingenheimer was invited to stay for lunch. He remembers Dennis as a guy who would go out of his way to take care of his friends.

Dennis's friends also found themselves utterly exasperated by his wild antics. Gregg Jakobson remembers riding motorcycles with Bruce Johnston in LA one afternoon. The pair roared to the crest of Beverly Glen Boulevard, pulled over, and surveyed the panoramic view of Hollywood below. Off in the distance, they could see a large cloud of dust rising from a vacant lot. Some maniac was spinning donuts, tearing up the ground, and abusing a gorgeous Jaguar. "What an asshole," griped Johnston. "Look what he's doing to that beautiful car!" He knew firsthand that the delicate British sports car was not made for such rough treatment because he owned one. "I hate to tell you this Bruce," replied Jakobson, "but that asshole is Dennis and that's your car."

Further wildness occurred when Dennis, Jakobson, and their friend Terry Melcher founded a club they called the Golden Penetrators. Dennis's girl chasing would grow to epic proportions while he was running with this crew. The trio purchased matching BSA 441 Victor motorcycles from Steve Allen's shop on Little Santa Monica Boulevard, and then they went cruising. Though the homes of the three club members were separated by a canyon, their powerful new bikes had off-road capability, giving them quick access to one another should a spontaneous party arise. Recalls Jakobson: "We could actually ride to each other's houses without ever going on any blacktop." They had freedom, wealth, and fame in abundance, and Hollywood had become one big, tasty cupcake for them to devour.

The first Beach Boys record to be released in 1966 was a cover of the traditional folk song "Sloop John B." Apparently, Al Jardine had suggested they record this tune, and Brian had come up with a beautiful and progressive arrangement for it. With its marching beat, prominent bass, and doubled guitar interplay, the song is the first

Beach Boys number that gave evidence of the new, maturing sound that Brian was so in favor of. It sounded like a Beach Boys record, but it also had something different: its lyrics told a tale of fighting and getting drunk; no mention was made of girls, the beach, or the sun. The release helped bring the band to the attention of the socially aware college audience, and it stormed to number three on the *Billboard* charts. The voice of each band member was featured in the mix of this single, which would turn out to be a major stepping stone for the group as a whole.

The record's picture sleeve depicted a very stoned-looking and disheveled Brian, apparently nodding off, sitting next to the others. His drug use had by now become entrenched, and the new music he had begun to create was leading him down a more abstract and adventurous path. When the band returned from their latest tour, they found Brian ready and waiting to finish recording what most would consider his finest work: *Pet Sounds*. He had written the lyrics with Tony Asher, and was expecting his bandmates to plunge themselves into themes they had never wrestled with before: sadness, guilt, longing, resentment, fear, and ego were all broached and explored in this sensitive new music. Until this point, none of these emotional or psychological conditions were likely to pop into the average music lover's mind when the name "Beach Boys" was mentioned, but from then on these things would all be part of the collage.

Before *Pet Sounds* was released, Brian attempted to prepare the world for what was coming. He released the solo single "Caroline No," a plaintive love letter to a girl from his past. A remarkably stark piece of work, the song is presented with undeniable honesty, but it was too penetrating for most listeners to fully appreciate. After making a brief appearance in the top forty, "Caroline No" vanished from the charts.

Pet Sounds, released in May of 1966, is a world in and of itself. So much has been said and written about it. It has been reviewed from every angle and thoroughly hashed over. Little fresh insight can be added. The bottom line is that this music has profoundly affected many people and stands as a testament to the genius that created it.

The popularity of *Pet Sounds* built slowly; the wave took thirty years to crest. At first, US sales were good but not exactly brisk. In Great Britain, however, critics quickly hailed the LP as a masterwork,

The sweet and wholesome *Pet Sounds* era

KEITH REEVES ARCHIVE

and it became a much bigger hit across the pond. In the US, the single "Wouldn't It Be Nice" did climb to number eight and helped generate album sales. This track had a unique accordion-adorned sound and fabulous Hal Blaine drumming. The vocal arrangement was astonishing — the voices of each band member were layered over and over until a virtual choir of harmony was achieved. Carl revealed that it was Dennis singing the bass part in the opening sections of "Wouldn't It Be Nice" — a rarity, since Mike usually handled that end of things. Brian has always said that Dennis's catchy "run run reooh" lines on the fade-out give the song a "special" impact.

Still, *Pet Sounds* is primarily a vocal showcase for other band members, including Bruce Johnston, who is prominently featured for the first time. Carl turns in one of the most angelic vocal performances in rock history with "God Only Knows." Al has maintained that Brian wasn't using Dennis's voice very much around this time, except

for what he described as "cameos." With such a pool of singing talent at his disposal, Brian may have been inclined to bypass Dennis for these expensive recording sessions — he was just too difficult to nail down.

Despite being overlooked in this way, Dennis praised the *Pet Sounds* project freely from the era of its inception to the end of his life. "It was an honor to participate in those sessions," he told me solemnly in 1978. Even from that distant perspective, his pride in his big brother's work was immense. On the *Pet Sounds* cover is a shot of the band feeding some animals (pets). Dennis is wearing a mod-looking blue shirt and a black vest, Mike sports a beard, and Brian, in a double-breasted coat, has hair as long as Dennis's. The times were changing, and these physical clues indicated that the Beach Boys were changing too.

At Capitol Records, the brass was getting worried. Sales of *Pet Sounds* were not spectacular, and there were whispers that Brian was on the wrong course. He was now engaged in another project, and this one sounded even stranger to Capitol. It was a new single comprised of many different components, which Brian was constantly shuffling. Though this bizarre creation was practically finished, Brian couldn't let go. Before he could release it, everything had to be perfect. As the months passed and a rumored twenty to fifty thousand dollars in studio fees were racked up (an exorbitant sum for 1966), the pressure intensified: this record would have to be a winner. Period.

The single, "Good Vibrations," was finally released in October of 1966, and it made a beeline for the top of the charts. It knocked all of the competition aside, and by December 10 it had grabbed the number-one spot. At a moment in history when hipness was everything, the Beach Boys had the trippiest, most far-out song on the radio. It boasted a great lyric that Mike and Brian had devised, and it showed off Carl's serene, lilting voice. The song was so progressive for its time that I can remember wondering who this new psychedelic group was. Discovering that it was the Beach Boys, my initial reaction was, "Man, those guys have really freaked out." With its spacey organ, strange oboe, silly theramin, and wild vocal and percussive effects, "Good Vibrations" was pure innovation — a huge leap forward. It is also, quite simply, a great song. Dennis's voice is buried in the harmony layers, and he also plays an eerie, almost funereal,

organ part when the song slows down briefly. In the end, Brian had proven that he knew exactly what he was doing. The Beach Boys would now be ranked among the most progressive bands, and "Good Vibrations" would come to be considered by many as the finest pop single of all time.

A rarely seen British television documentary was filmed at the peak of the "Good Vibrations" mania that gripped the world for a spell in late 1966. After the song had established itself at the top of the charts on both sides of the Atlantic, the Boys, minus Brian, were filmed arriving in England and preparing for an eagerly anticipated performance at London's Hammersmith Odeon. The film was narrated by Marianne Faithful and produced by Rolling Stones manager Andrew Loog Oldham. It is fascinating — a graphic historical document of the intense popularity the Beach Boys enjoyed in the UK just after the release of *Pet Sounds*. We see the band arriving at Heathrow and being engulfed by surging throngs of British fans who mirror American-style Beatlemania circa 1964. The concert footage shows a sold-out crowd euphorically communing with their American heroes. In another sequence, which is both innocent and a bit surreal, we accompany Dennis and Al as they shop for antique musical instruments in a quaint London shop. Sampling the merchandise, the pair appears to be very stoned. It is rare to see Al and Dennis interact on a personal level, and this glimpse into the dynamics of their relationship demonstrates that Jardine was a worthy foil for Dennis's incessant teasing. All of these documentary moments come together to evoke a wonderful high point in Beach Boys history.

The doubters quieted by the huge success of "Good Vibrations," Brian was given carte blanche for a short time. He exploited the opportunity by moving full speed ahead into the avant garde. The album first known as *Dumb Angel* and then as *Smile* would be the result — and a shocking expression of the psyche of rock's most abstract-thinking and creatively fearless artist it was. The word *psychedelic* doesn't begin to describe what his LSD-laced mind was now coming up with. The only resemblance this music bore to previous Beach Boys material was the spectacular vocal harmonies and the general level of quality. But the context these familiar elements were placed in was nothing short of frightening. Some tunes — like the wispy "Wonderful" and the goofy "Vegetables" — were either gentle or

Pounding out the "Good Vibrations" while Brian worked on *Smile*

funny, but for the most part the *Smile* tracks were very dark in nature, and to a number of people this was just unacceptable. A film made during the legendary "Fire" sessions shows a perplexed Mike Love being forced by Brian to wear a fireman's hat, along with all the other musicians in the studio; Mike rolls his eyes and shakes his head as Brian's death march pours from the speakers. Creating nightmares of sound, Brian had gone completely over the top, and the Gothic overtones of Van Dyke Parks's lyrics only exacerbated the situation. Though the Boys were riding high internationally, and though their success was entirely due to Brian's experimentation, most of the other band members were very unhappy with what they were now hearing from Brian.

But not Dennis. He once remarked that "Brian was so fruitful" at this time, and he continued to be in awe of his brother. They now drew closer together. Dennis's main function was to supply the hash joints that were regularly smoked at the sessions. He was also adding vocal parts — on the album's strange version of "You Are My Sunshine" he sang lead. On "Who Ran the Iron Horse?" his unusual, raspy voice perfectly complements Brian's eclectic arrangement. It's prominent, as well, in parts of "Heroes and Villains" and "Bicycle Rider," where we hear Dennis alternately singing, groaning, moaning, laughing, and breathing. Through it all, Dennis was astounded at the bravery his brother had displayed in defying conventional definitions of pop music. "We'd be in the studio and he would play us a song," said Dennis. "We'd start singing, we'd start crying it was so great. I mean, it was like, 'How could this possibly be happening? How'd you write that?' There is not one person in the group that could come close to Brian's talent."

Around this time, Brian acquired a far-out new group of friends. He'd been latched onto by some members of LA's hippie elite, and they began to hang out and party with him during the recording sessions. Brian would tell his acolytes wild stories about the adventurous Dennis, stories that, as ever, acted as a spur to his own creativity. Throughout the whole mad tea party that the *Smile* experience had turned into, Brian and Dennis found themselves in sync.

This interval of brotherly harmony was brief. It wasn't long before Dennis had managed to irritate Brian. When Brian got the urge to film everything that was going on around him and purchased an

expensive handheld movie camera, Dennis eagerly volunteered to drive him around LA so he could shoot to his heart's content. The pair set out in Dennis's Ferrari and tore through Benedict Canyon. Brian hung out the window, camera in hand. As always, Dennis was driving much too fast, and they skidded into a large tree. The camera flew from Brian's grasp, hit the ground, and smashed into a million pieces. Returning home, Brian was heard to say, "Goddamned Dennis wrecked my camera. Everything was going great, but that fucking Dennis just kept going faster and faster until we crashed."

When the press asked Dennis in late 1966 about Brian's newest work, he shot back, "It makes *Pet Sounds* stink, that's how good it is." Of course, Dennis tended to exaggerate, and nothing could make *Pet Sounds* "stink": the point is that he truly believed in what his brother was doing. If others within the Beach Boys' circle had offered Brian the support Dennis had given him, things might have turned out differently; but, as it transpired, both the *Smile* project and Brian's boundless creativity died a slow and painful death. Brian's drug use increased, sessions were canceled, Capitol demanded product, band members complained volubly about the new musical direction — and then it all fell apart. Brian scrapped the whole thing and rumors that he had burned the tapes started circulating. They were false, but the great *Smile* was never completed, and in some ways the Beach Boys would never recover.

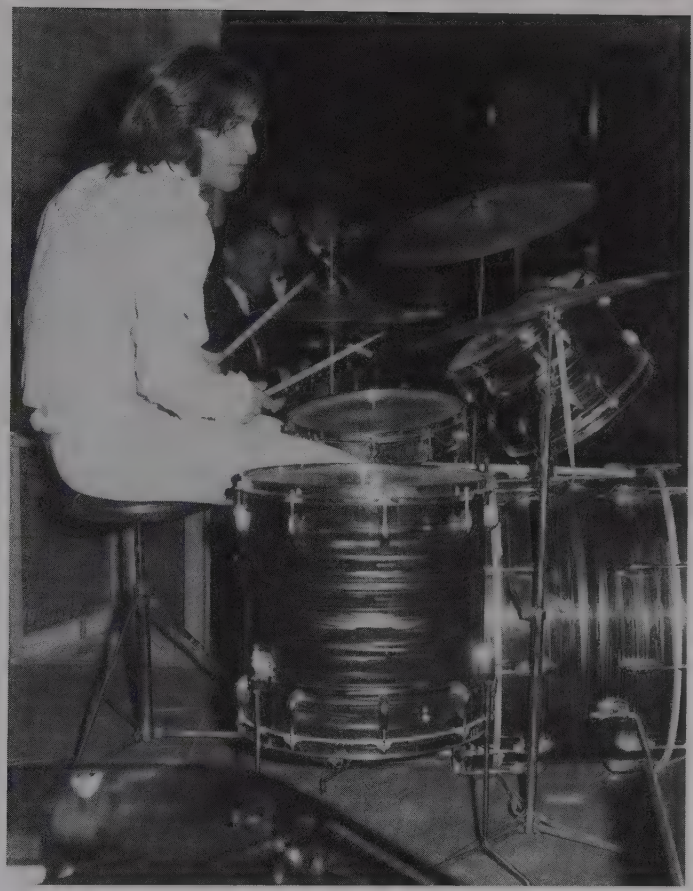
As a small consolation, Brian did release a shortened version of one song from the project. That single, "Heroes and Villains," was released in July 1967 and held out a tantalizing glimpse of what might have been. Essentially three and a half minutes of whirling, swirling swoops and stops, the world's first psychedelic barbershop-quartet song also exudes a weird sonic aura. At one point, the voices trail off into a dreamy haze as a distorted keyboard overtakes the mix. Then complete silence falls. Suddenly, the voices burst back, this time wild and speed-induced, sending VU meters into the red. The impression we receive is that we are actually hearing Brian's brain cells melt down. This brilliant, misunderstood single was popular enough to attain the number-twelve position on the charts, but to Brian this was simply not good enough. At that moment, his retreat into semiseclusion began.

The next Beach Boys LP, *Smiley Smile*, came out in September, and

although its title was similar, it reflected little of *Smile*'s manic brilliance. Carl referred to the release as a "bunt instead of a grand slam." Most of it was recorded in a few weeks at Brian's house, and the final product sounds like a stoned rehearsal session. The album does, however, harbor a few memorable tunes, like the ethereal "Wind Chimes," which contains one startling moment when whisper turns to abrasion. This curious song displays the ultimate use of Dennis's flat singing, on the word "tingalin," and ends with several quiet moments of the most angelic Beach Boys harmonies ever recorded. Legend has it that *Smiley Smile* was used at certain clinics to coax hippies down from bad LSD trips — I would think that songs like "Fall Breaks and Back to Winter (W. Woodpecker Symphony)" might actually have sent an acid casualty screaming into the streets in search of the nearest tall building to jump off. The album limped to number forty-one on the LP charts and was considered the first real Beach Boys failure. As with most of the group's records, time has been kind to *Smiley Smile*; today it's considered a quirky, innovative tongue-in-cheek artifact — good listening fun. The album is a kind of poignant signpost, a sad reminder that its epic predecessor missed its moment in history.

After Brian pulled the Beach Boys out of their scheduled appearance at the historic Monterey Pop Festival in the summer of 1967, he knew his bandmates needed a boost, so he arranged for the Boys to play a special series of shows in Hawaii to be recorded for a live LP. The project would have the working title "Lei'd in Hawaii," and the band members were all for it — they felt that a live album might be just the thing to get them back on track. Brian made the trip to the islands with the band and filled in for Bruce Johnston, who was in England at the time. He also convinced some of the Boys to take LSD before they went onstage. Bad idea. Their performance was something less than spectacular, and most reviews stated that opening act Bobbie Gentry had stolen the show. An attempt was made to spruce up the tapes for release, but Capitol and Brian both decided they weren't good enough, and the project was shelved.

As 1967 wound down, the Beach Boys were in a very unstable state, and they retreated to Brian's home studio at 10452 Belagio Road to work on their next LP. Partway through, the sessions were moved to Wally Heider's studio at 6373 Selma Avenue in Hollywood.



ROACHCLIPS ARCHIVE

As they had done when recording *Smiley Smile*, group members played most of the instruments, and this meant that Dennis was used as the primary session drummer again. The album *Wild Honey* was characterized by a raw, stripped-down sound and boasted none of the studio wizardry that had marked the previous several records. Instead, it relied on strong singing and catchy, tight, up-tempo songs.

Carl dominated the collection, delivering soulful vocals on songs like "Darlin'." He also tore it up on the Stevie Wonder hit "I Was Made to Love Her," which revealed the Beach Boys to be an excellent rhythm-and-blues unit. The Al Jardine-sung "How She Boogalooed It" is one of the best rockers the band ever put down. As its popping snare drum, handclaps, and maracas form a perky percussive assault,

its cheesy organ solo lifts the track into the realm of pop euphoria. Dennis's drumming here is basic and, for the most part, devoid of anything fancy, but his fine performances on "Darlin'" and "I Was Made to Love Her" exude personality.

Wild Honey made it to number twenty-four on the *Billboard* LP charts in early 1968 and is considered the first example of the back-to-roots genre popularized by the Beatles with *Get Back* and the Rolling Stones with *Beggars Banquet*. The roller-coaster ride was leveling out slightly for the Beach Boys, and they had begun to think that they should leave Capitol Records. They were also still trying to adjust to Brian being a part-time participant. Soon, it would be time for each band member to show what he had in terms of songwriting ability. It would be Dennis Wilson's opportunity to shine. And shine he would.

5 A DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH

THE YEAR 1968 was a volatile one: war was raging in Vietnam, students were protesting against the establishment, acid rock was gaining widespread popularity, and the once-underground counterculture was now in plain view. In the midst of it all, the Beach Boys had become a misunderstood commodity. They were saddled with an image that was foreign to the times. With the exception of a few enlightened souls, most young people saw them as square, out of touch, a thing of the past. An ironic predicament for a band that had led the movement to topple long-standing creative barriers. Few remembered that they had outstripped most of their contemporaries in too many ways to list.

Despite the setbacks of 1967, the Boys continued to produce record after record of a quality not many could match. Their catalog became a treasure trove for critics and fans to peruse decades into the future. But, in 1968, the Beach Boys were to discover that they'd become invisible to a large segment of the music-loving public.

Part of the problem was that Capitol Records had been busy releasing greatest-hits packages and shoddy compilations of the band's surf-and-car-period output. The steady stream of yesterday's product only served to confuse record buyers and to deflect the focus from the Beach Boys' newer releases. As the band's days as Capitol recording artists dwindled, the label seemed to be adopting the attitude that only the old material counted. Another problem was that although the Boys still did an excellent job in concert, their live show was a mellow and less dynamic experience than it had once been.

With acts like the Jimi Hendrix Experience, the Doors, Cream, and Janis Joplin transforming audience expectations — through stage theatrics and eardrum-shattering decibel levels — the Beach Boys came across as very tame.

Although Brian had tested the waters earlier, Dennis was the first Beach Boy to fully embrace the flower-generation movement of the late sixties, and though he would never involve himself in any one scene for very long, he still paused to enjoy the free-spirited attitude of LA's hippies. For example, he participated in several of the huge love-ins that were held in Griffith Park during the summer of 1968. These loosely organized events drew astoundingly large crowds: up to twenty thousand kids would gather in that LA green space, euphorically freaking out to the strains of the newest psychedelic bands. Veteran producer Kim Fowley, master of ceremonies and occasional performer at these legendary gatherings, recalls Dennis's involvement clearly. "He used to come up on his motorcycle. He played drums once and guitar another time when we had to throw a band together at the last minute because somebody didn't show up. We'd be out there jamming in front of eight or nine thousand people, chanting 'om.' It was the 'incense and peppermints' syndrome."

Fowley released his own album, called *Outrageous*, around this time, and Dennis appreciated its irreverence. Its cover had a slightly sadomasochistic flavor — a naked girl crouched at Fowley's feet. Reportedly, Dennis hung the cover in Brian's home studio, provoking the ire of Brian's wife, Marilyn. "His championing my record to his friends and family certainly didn't have a happy result," remarks Fowley, who admired Dennis's genuineness.

Another LA resident with whom Dennis struck up a relationship was actor Steve McQueen. Like kids skipping school, the two would meet secretly behind the Mobile gas station on the Pacific Coast Highway and then head off to race their cars up the coast or tinker with their engines and talk about girls. "Steve liked Dennis because he was real," says Gregg Jakobson. "Dennis didn't give a shit that he was Steve McQueen — he just liked him because he knew a lot about cars and motorcycles." Like an older brother, the veteran actor would also counsel the Beach Boy on his latest crush. Early on, Dennis became infatuated with French actress Catherine Deneuve; then, for a time, it was Goldie Hawn. Finally, actress Jane Seymour

crossed Dennis's path, and all others were forgotten. "When Dennis met Jane, he was instantly taken with her," says Jakobson. "He didn't stop talking about her for a very long time."

One of the many strange aspects of the Beach Boys' 1968 experience was the serious involvement of certain band members with transcendental meditation and that practice's controversial promoter, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Typically, it was Dennis who was the first to discover the Maharishi; he turned the others on to the benefits of meditation. The Beatles had recently become enamored of the diminutive, gray-bearded, white-robed man with all the answers, and they had acted as Dennis's initial conduit to the Maharishi. Dennis once said that the first words he ever heard the Maharishi utter were, "Live your life to the fullest." Of course, this had long been Dennis's own credo, and he soon tired of the TM routine and moved on to something else. Mike Love, however, became one of the world's most celebrated meditation devotees and a lifelong follower of the Maharishi's teachings.

The Beach Boys confounded many when they decided to feature the Maharishi on their spring 1968 tour, which was billed as "the most exciting event of the decade." The Boys would play and the Maharishi would lecture. Planning and promoting this tour was a costly undertaking, and a small fortune was lost when the odd pairing turned into a disaster. There were a number of contributing factors. The band's popularity was at a low ebb. Bad press dogged the Maharishi after the Beatles rejected him. When Martin Luther King Junior was assassinated, the southern leg of the summer tour was canceled because rioting was predicted.

According to Fred Vail, "The Maharishi tour killed all our momentum because of the financial losses and the time commitments that ended up generating nothing for the band." Huge amounts of money were squandered, the band's already tenuous popularity was further weakened, but still the worst that 1968 had to offer the Beach Boys was yet to come: Dennis had made a new friend, and that friend had moved in with him. Dennis believed that his new buddy was a unique and highly creative individual — an artist. His name was Charles Manson.

The first Beach Boys release of 1968 was a very different-sounding single, appropriately titled "Friends." Cowritten by the three Wilson

brothers and Al Jardine, the song is a whimsical reflection on the relationship they'd developed over the years. With sparkling vocals by Brian and Carl and a waltzy feel, it shuffles and floats in a lighter-than-air kind of way — another entirely unique creation. However, "Friends" so little resembled anything that was considered hip at the time that it got no higher than number forty-seven on the singles charts.

The flip side of "Friends" was the first non-Brian Wilson song to be released on a Beach Boys-penned single. It was titled "Little Bird," and it was cowritten and sung by Dennis — a surprisingly strong debut. Many were floored by the cut on first listen. Brian and Carl add support vocals to Dennis's lead; the instrumentation is sprinkled with oboe and banjo; and the whole thing is driven by a muscular drum track. "Little Bird" is beautiful in its simplicity, employing a very solid midtempo groove. It stands up to the best material of the era.

As Brian stood back to allow the other Beach Boys their moment in the spotlight, many expected Carl to flourish. And, as Mike had already established himself as a good lyricist, some thought he would take his place as the group's premier songwriter. Al and Bruce, too, had demonstrated a flair for writing, and it would be time for them to seize their chance. Only Dennis excited little expectation. Too often, he'd seemed distracted from the music, too busy just having a good time to contribute. Riding his motorcycles, racing his exotic cars, hunting, fishing, horseback riding, surfing, skiing, chasing women, and partying seemed to be what he did best. His innate talent as a composer was still relatively unrecognized.

When at last he did shift his focus to the music, reveals Gregg Jakobson, "He started taking his piano playing more seriously. He'd ask Brian to show him stuff until he got a pretty good grasp of chords. Dennis definitely had a feel all his own — he didn't have to think about it. Things came to him pretty naturally." He also began to write songs that forcefully communicated his emotional depth and his full-tilt approach to life. The other band members had their own songwriting successes, but over the next few years it would be Dennis who racked up the most writing credits on the band's records — after Brian, of course. His tunes would eventually win him a great deal of critical and fan acclaim. At this, the roughest patch to date in the

band's journey, the Beach Boys were to see the emergence of their second great songwriter. The diamond in the rough had begun to sparkle.

The previous spring, Dennis had met Stephen Kalinich — poet, folk singer, and the only outside party who holds the distinction of having written songs with all three Wilson brothers. For Dennis, Kalinich would become the impetus that would get his songwriting career off the ground. Dennis loved Stephen and his metaphysical poetry style. In 1967, the two spent time together on an outdoor stage at Santa Monica City College reciting creative word flow for anybody who would listen. Soon, their camaraderie blossomed into a spiritual partnership that resulted in "Little Bird" and another moving song, "Be Still."

While the two were hanging out at Dennis's log-cabin residence at 14400 Sunset Boulevard, magic began to occur. "We were in that Will Rogers cabin sitting at the piano and we sang together," remembers Kalinich. "Dennis began, 'You know, you know . . .' and I said, 'You know, you know, you are. Be still and know you are . . .' and the song was born on that little piano." "Be Still" was included on the next Beach Boys LP. With its simple organ backing, it cuts through the layers of Dennis's brash exterior to expose the gentleness of his soul. "We just loved it," says Kalinich when describing his and Dennis's reaction to the final product. "It was like a prayer that Dennis and I put forth to the world." Though the two songs were believed to lack commercial potential at the time of their release, they've stood the test of time due to their clear and simple beauty. "Some of the greatest things that impact history come not with a big bang," says Kalinich. "They come in soft and simple ways."

That June, the new Beach Boys LP hit the stores. It was named after the single "Friends." Certainly one of the most original and beautiful of Beach Boys albums, *Friends* would also be their worst-selling LP to date. Still, Brian has referred to it as his favorite, and over the years it has been widely acclaimed. The most intriguing aspect of *Friends* is that band members wrote most of the material together. While other Beach Boys albums list every member of the group in the writing credits, this just reflects the fact that each wrote his songs on his own or in collaboration with one of the others. *Friends* is a token of a moment of creative togetherness in the Beach

Boys camp, and the overriding feeling is camaraderie and family. Recorded mostly in Brian's home studio, *Friends* encompasses a thoroughly eclectic blend of styles. For several tracks, session musicians — such as drummer Jim Gordon, saxophonist Steve Douglas, and bassist Lyle Ritz — were brought in. Other tracks were completely home brewed — they featured only Beach Boys.

From the opening prayer "Meant for You," to the quirky, discordant jazz of "Transcendental Meditation," *Friends* is uplifting, funny, touching, and totally noncommercial. Even Mike seems to have relinquished the idea of making a hit record, and his work here is some of the most creative of his entire career. The spiritual tone of the LP owes much to the Boys' TM experience; the Maharishi's peaceful influence permeates the grooves. Brian offers us an articulately inane manifesto of his growing inactivity with "Busy Doin' Nothin'," a samba-flavored tune, complete with flute and smooth acoustic-guitar strumming, that delivers a blow-by-blow account of his withdrawal from life's interactions. For Dennis, the LP was a major vindication: his first two solo tracks were part of the lineup. But it seemed that no matter how creative they were, the Beach Boys had lost the knack of mustering an audience. *Friends* fell off the charts without ever reaching the top one hundred.

By the summer of 1968, the band was witnessing practically everything it touched turn to failure. The Boys were in desperate need of a lift. Then Mike came up with what would become a recurring theme for the band. He wanted to compose a song with Brian about the days of surfing, the beach, and California girls. Brian agreed, and the result was a nostalgia-tinged rocker called "Do It Again." In a way, this move brought the group back to square one. Released in July, "Do It Again" was the most successful thing the band had done in well over a year. It attacked the listener with its machinelike Dennis Wilson beat and was bolstered by an irresistible vocal arrangement, courtesy of Brian. The song reached the top twenty near the end of the summer, and for a brief interval it appeared as though the Beach Boys had recovered some of their luster. The price they paid for this temporary recovery was, however, very steep: "Do It Again" had required them to take back their old surfer-boy image — an image they'd struggled so hard to shake.

Capitol was now just a year away from losing the Beach Boys for

good, and the band was trying to fulfill its contract obligations by coming up with two more records. One of these would be titled *Stack o' Tracks*, and it would be a collection of old Beach Boys tunes minus the vocal tracks. The concept was innovative, and the finished product was quite a revelation. Brian's gorgeous instrumental backings could be heard clearly, in an unadulterated form, for the first time.

Fears and anxieties had begun to rule Brian's existence by this point. Confining himself to his Bel Air mansion, he spent most days in bed. Occasionally, he would venture downstairs to his home studio, where the band now recorded, and show flashes of his old self — helping a little here, adding a little something there. Then he'd lose interest and slip away to his upstairs refuge where, all alone, he'd consume drugs and sleep in an effort to distance himself from the constant pain that the twists and turns of past events were causing him.

The other members of the band had become used to being rich. They lived lavish lifestyles that took a huge income to support. As the hits dried up, the cash influx evaporated as well. It had become obvious that without Brian, the Beach Boys would have to find new ways to survive.

During an East Coast appearance that year, Dennis met a couple who would remain his friends throughout the rest of his life. Ed Roach and Trisha Campo, a pair of enthusiastic teenagers, had traveled to the Beach Boys concert in style in Roach's shiny new GTO convertible. As they were leaving, Dennis crossed in front of Roach's car. "I yelled, 'Hey Dennis, great show,'" recalls Roach, "and he turned around and said, 'Fuck that — give me a ride!'" Within seconds, Ed and Trisha and Dennis Wilson were racing through the streets of New York City with Dennis calling out directions to his hotel. The wild ride came to a halt across town in front of a five-star hotel bordering Central Park. The young couple followed Dennis up to his luxurious suite, where Dennis generously shared his marijuana and began strumming a guitar. "I was so shocked to see him pick up a guitar," says Roach, "and then he started playing us these great songs." Ed had been a longtime Beach Boys fan, but like so many others he'd wrongly assumed that Dennis was the least-talented member of the group. After listening for just a few minutes, Roach's opinion of Dennis's musical ability changed forever. Then Dennis

played a couple of tunes that had a somewhat frightening edge. He confided that they had been written by a friend of his back in LA named Charlie.

The Beach Boys appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show* without Brian in 1968, singing "Good Vibrations" and "Do It Again." Clad in their best white outfits, they turned in a solid performance. The fact that they could still land a national TV appearance during such a career low was an encouraging sign. After the show, Mike and Dennis shared a joint of Panama Red, a particularly strong variety of marijuana. As their two very different minds floated into the drug's euphoric stream, they laughed hard and slapped each other on the back. Gradually, as the outside world had shown itself to be so harsh and unpredictable, Mike and Dennis had changed. Each had reacted in his own way to what had transpired. And, from this point on, each would attempt to pull the Beach Boys cart in the opposite direction. Year by year, the strain would increase. That night, after the *Sullivan Show*, Dennis and Mike each took a final deep, spicy hit of the joint. A close friend who was there to witness the moment swears it was the very last time Mike and Dennis ever participated in this ritual together.

The last Beach Boys release of 1968 was a single produced by Carl and Bruce called "Bluebirds over the Mountain," a cover of a 1950s Ersel Hickey song. The record featured Ed Carter's screaming lead guitar and terrific harmonizing by Brian and Carl. Europe was still supporting the band strongly and the tune became a hit there, but in the US it stalled at number sixty-one, killing any momentum remaining from the previous single. The flip side of "Bluebirds" was a dark tune with a mysterious lyric sung by Dennis. It had an eerie backwards cymbal opening, and was titled "Never Learn Not to Love." Dennis had cowritten the song with his soon-to-be-notorious pal Charles Manson.

Towards the end of 1968, the Boys undertook a massive European tour that gave them a much-needed ego boost. Their masses of faithful fans in the United Kingdom showered them with the kind of adulation that was only a sweet memory for them in the United States. The British still considered the Beach Boys superstars, as evidenced by a documentary film made by Vic Kettle. Band members are shown cavorting with their fans, dining at elegant restaurants, drinking, dancing, and smoking large amounts of hashish. With the

Peace, Love, and Mr. Natural (UK, 1968)

ROACHCLIPS ARCHIVE

song "I Went to Sleep" creating an appropriately stoned-out atmosphere, a barely coherent Dennis rides the group's bus to the next concert. Dreamily, he provides a running commentary that includes the classic line, "Should've seen that blonde I was with last night . . . she was all right." The camera lingers on him — disheveled, intently picking his nose — as he explains, "I always have lots of trouble with my boogers on the Continent."

In April of 1969, the Beach Boys made a sensational appearance on *The Mike Douglas Show*. Dennis fronted the band, singing Manson's spooky "Never Learn Not to Love" dressed in a flowing red-satin shirt and sandals. His performance was sexy and cool, prompting one to wonder why he'd been relegated to the background for so long. The electricity he generated, his charisma, lent the band an air of mystery that suddenly made them seem very current. The band was badly in need of an image enhancement, and Dennis had done the trick.

Everything, from their musical style to their visual presentation, was in rapid evolution, and the Beach Boys were on the brink of their

departure from Capitol Records. The animosity between them and their career-making label had grown significantly over the years, and they were anxious to be free of their contract. Fred Vail is one of those who thought this move was a mistake. "Anytime you have a catalog that is that immense it makes sense to stay with that company. Every new release stimulates sales of the old records and vice versa. The differences weren't so great that they couldn't have been worked out, but unfortunately that never happened."

Capitol needed one last album from the Beach Boys to fulfill the terms of their contract. That album would be called *20/20*. The title signifies the fact that it was the twentieth Beach Boys LP to be released on Capitol. A collection of recent singles, B sides, a few old and new tracks, it is a surprisingly cohesive compilation, and it shows just how strong the band's material was at this time. The lovely Carl Wilson vehicle "I Can Hear Music" is a sweet highlight from the Phil Spector catalog, and Brian's "Time to Get Alone" is yet another arresting ode to his own reclusiveness. Al Jardine gives a strong performance on "Cottonfields," and the lost *Smile* gem "Cabinessence" makes its public debut here embellished with some new vocals by Carl and Dennis. "On 'Cabinessence,' there's a line in there — 'truck driving man' — which I sang," said Dennis. "I got off so much doing that. It's mixed way down in the track and it's syncopated all the way through. Right there is my biggest turn on." The effect was dark and appropriately foreboding for a former *Smile* track.

Another *20/20* contribution from Dennis is equally eerie — the haunting "Be with Me." The song is one of several original Dennis Wilson compositions on the album, and it delivers in a big way. With a deeply reverbed drum sound creating a moody backdrop, Dennis sings a bleak lyric that conjures up images of cold nights, new love, and self-reflection. A blend of brass and strings gives this number a sonic punch evocative of the spacey atmosphere of the *Smile* sessions, but the cut has a decidedly modern edge in Dennis's hands. "Be with Me" is a compelling preview of one style that Dennis would showcase on his forthcoming solo projects.

At the cataclysmic conclusion of "Be with Me," Dennis screams the word "free" over and over. Ed Roach tells the following related story. In New York again for another concert, Dennis reconnected with Ed and Trisha, who were now married. Again, he invited them

to his penthouse suite for a small party. The party consisted of Ed, Trisha, Dennis, and twenty or so of Dennis's female devotees. "The moon landing was on TV, and all these college-age girls were sitting around on the floor just to be close to Dennis," says Ed. Finally, Dennis announced that he had to catch a plane early in the morning but that his guests were welcome to stay. "He turned out the lights and climbed into bed," says Roach. "I was thinking it was so weird that all these girls were still on the floor. Then Dennis reaches down and grabs one of them, pulls her into bed, and starts having sex with her right there." When Dennis reached his climax, reveals Roach, he started yelling, "free-eeeee!" "It was just like on that record. I've never been able to listen to that song with a straight face again."

Another Dennis Wilson composition featured on *20/20* is the raucous "All I Want to Do." This basic three-chord jam is Mike Love's opportunity to rock out — seldom would he show himself capable of producing the gutsy sound he delivers here. If you listen closely, you'll hear during the song's conclusion the sounds of a couple in the throws of passion. A reliable source informed me that Dennis actually brought a prostitute into the studio and had engineer Stephen Desper record the resulting encounter for inclusion on this recording. Dennis's quest for authenticity in his art, paired with his extremely rebellious attitude, makes this slightly unsavory story easy to believe.

The Beach Boys' final Capitol release was a single, aptly titled "Break Away," written by Brian and Murry. An exemplary showcase for the best harmony singers in rock, the tune had an up-tempo feel and a couple of quirky twists and turns. The flip side was an exciting number called "Celebrate the News," written by Dennis and his friend Gregg Jakobson. Effortlessly shifting style and tempo, "Celebrate the News" demonstrates the extent of Dennis's artistic range. His voice sounded better than ever. The band had started to depend on his ability to produce first-rate material. His self-confidence would reach new heights in the coming year.

The Beach Boys again appeared on *The Mike Douglas Show*, in August of 1969, this time performing "Break Away" with Carl and Al sharing the lead vocal. They were dressed mostly in white, and Dennis had a red scarf tied around his waist. After a brief interview touching on the Boys' recent trip to Czechoslovakia, Dennis fronted the band to do his song, "Celebrate the News." When he took the

spotlight he displayed a sexual daring reminiscent of Jim Morrison, yet more controlled. Towards the end of the show, Dennis paired up with Las Vegas singer Kaye Stevens, dancing and singing to a rock arrangement of the classic tune "Pennies from Heaven." The segment is hilarious to watch. Dennis endeavors to keep up with the energetic Stevens, who bumps and boogies with abandon and is obviously quite taken with her partner. The show aired only days after the Manson murders, and one wonders what might have been on Dennis's mind as he frolicked in front of the TV cameras.

Yet another attempt was made to freshen up the band's image and sound: Billy Hinsche was invited to become a Beach Boy. "One of the reasons the Boys asked me to join was to replace Bruce," says Hinsche. So why did he turn them down? "I had my loyalties to my own group [Dino, Desi, and Billy], and my parents wanted me to go to college." Hinsche would continue to play with the Boys on their concert tours, when school didn't get in the way; upon graduating, he joined the touring band full time.

For the time being, the band's official lineup was set, but major changes loomed on the horizon. The Capitol Records period was now officially over, and the Beach Boys began a professional liaison with Warner/Reprise that would last for the next eight years. Current manager Nick Grillo felt that Warner Brothers could give the Beach Boys the right kind of home, an environment where financial success and artistic growth could coexist. Label chief Mo Ostin truly believed that the veteran band stood a good chance of reclaiming their rightful place among the top acts of the day. With high hopes, and armed with a stack of new songs, the Beach Boys entered the new decade.

In February 1970, the Beach Boys released their debut single for their new record company. Distributed under the Brother/Reprise label, it was a meticulously crafted song called "Add Some Music to Your Day." Positive vibes radiated from this tune written by Brian, Mike, and Joe Knott. The band's shimmering, multilayered harmonies were laid on at full force. Each member's voice was featured, and the astonishing depth of the Beach Boys' talent pool during this period became apparent. The group and the label thought they had a sure hit when the advance orders for the record came in: they were huge.

The same month, the Boys were scheduled to do a concert at the Seattle Opera House. They found themselves in a quandary. Mike

had fasted himself into a very weak state and couldn't make the gig. With a new single out and a burning need to build fan support, they decided to perform the concert without their lead singer. At the last minute, Brian emerged from his bedroom and volunteered to take Mike's place. What followed was one very curious Beach Boys concert.

On the evening of February 28, 1970, as Dennis pounded out the beat to the concert opener, "Do It Again," a large, disheveled-looking figure leaned into the spotlight and began to sing, "It's automatic when I talk with old friends. . . ." There, pulling off a frighteningly accurate, appropriately nasal, Mike Love imitation, was Brian. Before the show, the troubled genius had apparently suffered one of his paranoid episodes and had nearly missed the gig. He'd disappeared for hours and was finally found on a rural hilltop — hiding from . . . the fans. Of course, in 1970 the Beach Boys didn't have many fans; the days of screaming throngs tearing off their idols' clothes were a distant memory. Still, as he was being coaxed back to town that evening, Brian insisted that he'd been chased by a mob of teeny-boppers. Despite all this, he did manage to deliver a good enough performance — in the Mike Love style — to please the polite concert audience. A fan I met taped that show, and you do have to hear it to believe it.

Radio support was required to get "Add Some Music to Your Day" moving out of the retail outlets, but, according to Fred Vail, no help was forthcoming from the nation's program directors. "At the time, I was a one-man band promoting the virtues of the Beach Boys, and nobody wanted to listen. Radio perceived that the Beach Boys were not hip anymore." With no airplay on the now-powerful FM band and little interest among the record-buying public, the single stiffed. No matter how good the product, it seemed that the American consumer was no longer interested in listening to anything by the Beach Boys. Their popular decline hadn't been arrested after all. Dennis had a handle on how this had come about: "Because of the attitude of a few mental dinosaurs intent on exploiting our initial success, Brian's huge talent has never been fully appreciated in America and the potential of the group has been stifled. . . . If the Beatles had suffered this kind of misrepresentation, they would have never got past singing 'Please, Please Me' and 'I Wanna Hold Your Hand' and leaping around in Beatle suits."

In Europe, though, the Boys continued to have hit records and remained a top concert draw. In May, a recording of a late 1968 Beach Boys performance was released in the UK. *Live in London* is a spirited representation of what the band sounded like during this transitional period. Since they didn't have to rely on oldies to please the British crowd, most of the material on the album was recent and fresh. *Live in London* gives us the Boys in top form. They'd augmented their sound with brass and recruited several extra musicians to fill out the arrangements. Dennis's drumming had, by this point, become very solid and consistent; it was still driven by the powerful energy that had always sustained him. On the rocker "Do It Again," he thumps the skins with a dynamism that gets every heart pumping and every toe tapping. With Carl nailing the vocal, "Darlin'" takes on a more urgent feel, and Dennis holds it down beautifully with his strong kick and tasteful fills. There is nothing wimpy about the Beach Boys' sound here: the group had matured into a tight, strong unit, and the concert performances were only going to get better.

Unfortunately, on the home front things were still pretty depressing. "There were times during this period when the boys couldn't draw more than two hundred people to a concert," says Vail, who had the difficult task of promoting the band during these dark days. "It was horrible being there, let alone knowing the pain they must have felt personally, by having had tens of thousands of people screaming at them in the not too distant past, then have the curtain go up and there was a couple of hundred people there." America just wasn't listening.

That summer, another new Beach Boys single was released — the first to feature an A side written by Dennis Wilson. The tune, "Slip on Through," was sung by Dennis at his soulful best. A catchy, uptempo rocker with a hint of funk, "Slip on Through" was the most modern-sounding record the band had released in a couple of years. With Dennis now leading the band in taking its sound in a very seventies direction, hopes for a future beyond Brian now seemed well founded. Brian lent a hand by giving the band a killer tune for the flip side titled "This Whole World." With its densely packed wall of Wilson harmony and its crystalline production, the song is a miracle of sonic purity. Yet the pairing of these two incredible songs didn't impress the public, and the single went nowhere. Still determined to

break out of their slump, the Boys applied themselves to putting the final touches on their next LP.

After Warner rejected the first version of the record, the band made some changes, and in August 1970, *Sunflower* was released. Without a doubt, it is one of the best albums the band ever made. Studded with brilliant contributions from every band member, it is a veritable smorgasbord of treats. The singing and production achieve a high level of technical excellence — it's hard to imagine how anything could have been improved upon. One of the album's highlights was a gorgeous new ballad written by Dennis and Gregg Jakobson. "Forever" is considered one of Dennis's all-time greatest offerings, and it would become an anthem to his fans. Bringing together many of the unique elements of his composing and performing styles, "Forever" is a love song for the ages. Dennis delivers his most affecting vocal yet with simplicity and grace; the instrumental backing is romantic and strong. The other band members lend velvet vocal support to Dennis, especially Brian, who graces the song with his lovely trademark falsetto.

On his boogie-woogie rocker "Got to Know the Woman," Dennis flaunts his playful sexist-rogue attitude, crudely tossing out lyrics like Jerry Lee Lewis on a Jack Daniels high. As he tells his babe to "do the chicken," the contrast to the sensitive persona of "Forever" is extreme. Dennis continues to dominate the band's sound with his peace-and-harmony themed "It's about Time." Cowritten with Al and sung by Carl, the song features an epic production — it's a high-energy kick that pulls out all the stops. Earl Palmer's boisterous drumming and Dennis Dragon's percussion punctuate the track. Again we witness Dennis Wilson leading the Beach Boys into a new, more contemporary, territory that without his impetus they probably would have avoided.

To help promote *Sunflower*, the band appeared on David Frost's television show in late 1970. Exuding maturity and confidence, seeming almost cutting edge, the Boys did a fantastic live version of "Cool, Cool Water." They also reached back into their catalog of hits and pulled out "Wouldn't It Be Nice," showcasing Dennis's intense drumming. Anyone lucky enough to have caught one of the band's live shows during this period will attest that the Beach Boys were producing the best sound of their careers.

Despite weak sales in the US, *Sunflower* was a huge hit in Great Britain, where it was hailed as the Beach Boys' *Sgt. Pepper* — all in all, a masterful offering from a band that had been there, done that, but still had something relevant to say. Now Dennis was primed to stretch his artistic wings even further. He had matured into a respected and clearly gifted musician who just happened to be blessed with good looks and who had a penchant for living life on the edge. In short, he was ripe to enter the mainstream of seventies culture.

Having divorced his first wife, Carole, Dennis had become involved with the woman who would become his second. Barbara Charren, soon to be Wilson, was probably the best thing that ever happened to Dennis. The years he spent with her were some of the most productive and emotionally stable of his life. Barbara seemed to strengthen Dennis with her joyful enthusiasm — she helped his confidence and creativity to flourish. Her bright influence was exactly what Dennis needed to disperse the bad aura that had engulfed him after the Manson experience. "Barbara was a wonderful, loving, very dedicated, and committed person to Dennis," says Fred Vail. Many of those who'd been witness to Dennis's incessant womanizing were surprised to see him pull himself together and set up housekeeping with Barbara in Pacific Palisades.

"She made him so happy," remarks Trisha Roach Campo. Barbara had a knack for normalizing Dennis's life because, as Trisha puts it, "She refused to feed into the drama." For a time, Barbara and Dennis managed to maintain their close bond. They had two beautiful sons, named Michael and Carl, and their happiness spilled over into the rest of Dennis's existence. He was considering a solo career, and, in light of his impressive growth as a songwriter, many people urged him to take the plunge.

At about this time, a feature film was being developed that was to star James Taylor and Warren Oates. *Two Lane Blacktop* told the tale of two young men who drag raced their souped-up '55 Chevy for a living; it dramatized the problems they encountered as they struggled to support their lifestyle. Directed by Monte Hellman, the movie featured Taylor as the driver and Oates as his psychotic 1970-GTO-driving rival. During the casting and preproduction, the project was considered to be one of the hottest properties in Hollywood. It was being compared in style to 1969's Academy Award-winning (for

Dennis and Barbara in love in LA (1969)

best picture) *Easy Rider*. One national publication predicted that *Two Lane Blacktop* would be the best film of 1970 on the basis of its script alone. Actor Bruce Dern has said, "Everyone wanted to be in this film. It is one of the very best of its genre." Dern himself auditioned for a role and was greatly disappointed when he was passed over. As the start of shooting neared, the role of one essential character was still unfilled: Taylor's partner, a mechanic. The role was custom-made for Dennis. Not only had he launched a career performing hit songs about cars, but he also loved racing them.

Dennis had been a car fanatic for many years. For a time, he'd drag raced professionally using an assumed name to keep Murry and the Capitol Records brass off his back. While Beach Boys fans were grooving to Brian's hot-rod hits, Dennis was piloting his yellow AC Cobra, setting track records on quarter-mile runs at speeds of up to 150 miles per hour. He outfitted the Cobra with a supercharger and used a specially mixed fuel; then he began taking on all comers. "I went with Dennis to Lion's Dragstrip and watched him race that Cobra against the rails," says Billy Hinsche. "He had to start in second gear because it would jump right off the ground in first." Dennis really knew his cars. The mechanic character's mindset — that of a vagabond street racer with a talent for sizing up the competition and keeping his car ready for the race — was right up Dennis's alley.

While drag racing was right up his alley, acting was not, and when, with trepidation, Dennis decided to go for the *Two Lane Blacktop* role, many expected that he would get laughed out of the audition. Fred Vail, who drove Dennis to his meeting with director Monte Hellman, had to convince him to get out of the car. Given the circumstances — he'd had no real acting experience and half of Hollywood was trying to find a way into the project — Dennis was up against some very long odds. Well, he beat them: just a week before principal photography began, Dennis was cast as the mechanic. He could now add "movie star" to his résumé. Hellman saw him as a natural for the role — what he lacked in technique, he made up for in pure sex appeal. At twenty-five years of age, Dennis was at his physical peak, and the big screen beckoned.

Through all of this, the Beach Boys were starting to pull themselves out of their two-year tailspin, giving a string of memorable live performances. They played a well-received set at the Big Sur Folk

Dennis plays "The Mechanic" in *Two Lane Blacktop* (1971)

Festival in October of 1970. The outdoor concert included hot acts like Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, and Linda Ronstadt. Held at the Monterey County Fairgrounds, the event drew the kind of audience the Boys could now win over armed with their new, hip image. This high-profile outing helped change more than a few minds about the validity of the Beach Boys. Dennis did not participate in the performance due to his *Two Lane Blacktop* commitment, Brian was missing as usual, but the band still made a success of the opportunity.

The next shrewd decision the Beach Boys made was to take a four-night booking at the Whiskey A Go Go on Hollywood's Sunset Strip. This tiny club had served as a launching pad for many new acts, but for an established, big-name group like the Beach Boys to play there was unheard of. Some advised the band members that the gig would represent an embarrassing step backward — the fact that they would be paid practically nothing seemed to back up that assertion. But the band members knew that they had a real credibility problem on their home turf, and this would be the perfect showcase to persuade the industry that they could kick ass like never before. On November 4, 1970, the six Beach Boys (including Brian and Dennis), augmented by Ed Carter and Daryl Dragon, crammed themselves onto the miniscule Whiskey stage and played two sets. Those Whiskey shows are still legendary in LA music circles. A particularly sweet moment occurred when Dennis took the microphone and dedicated his song "Forever" to his mom and dad, who were in the audience. As Murry and Audree savored the moment, Dennis brought the house down with his tender performance.

The buzz became so great around town that lines for the subsequent shows stretched around the block, and hundreds had to be turned away. Brian's participation only lasted for part of the engagement, but within days, the Beach Boys had restored their reputation with the who's who of the music industry. Now it was time to reconquer the East Coast.

In the midst of all this revitalized interest in the Beach Boys, Dennis was still flirting with the idea of doing a solo album. He was conducting recording sessions without the other band members and was exhilarated by the progress he was making. So confident was he in his abilities that he released a solo single in the UK that December. "Sound of Free," with "Lady" as its B side, was issued under the

names Dennis Wilson and Rumbo — Rumbo being keyboardist Daryl Dragon. "Daryl was really a major supporter and influence on Dennis," Ed Carter explains. "Because he had been to school and was classically trained, he could play jazz, rock, or anything." Carter adds, "Daryl was very impressed with Dennis. He was always encouraging Dennis to keep writing and always helping him with his arrangements." When, years later, people would ask him about that early creative partnership, Dennis would say (as he did in 1977), "Daryl and I had a wonderful musical relationship. We used to play the piano a lot together. He's probably the most brilliant keyboard man in the world."

"Sound of Free" was typical of the high-quality recordings Dennis had become so adept at producing. With its superbly dynamic presentation, "Sound of Free" was Dennis's proclamation of confidence in life and love. It is a spirited vehicle for his solid vocal work, beautifully linking both jaunty and soulful passages. Written for Barbara, "Lady" ranks among Dennis's finest songs. It begins with a single electronic rhythm, a stream of passionless pulses that lend a coldness to the song's opening. Dennis's vocal begins — "Flowers bloom in the spring" — followed by a complement of strings that shift the song into romantic mode. The tune is a relaxed exploration of a man's commitment to his ladylove. Released on the Stateside label, the single (now an extremely rare artifact) was not a hit, but it did show that Dennis was perfectly capable of creating first-rate material without any input from the other Beach Boys. A movie coming out, a solo single, and a blooming romance: these were high times for Dennis. He was becoming a high-profile personality in his own right, and for a time he would wield real power within the Beach Boys hierarchy.

Yet another major image-improving event was in store for the Beach Boys: a persistent group of hard-core fans managed to get them booked into Carnegie Hall in New York City. The February 20, 1971 concert was SRO. Flexing their newfound muscle, the Boys turned in an impeccable two-hour performance. They opened with "Heroes and Villains" and proceeded to charm the audience with a dynamic blend of old and new material. Practically washed up six months earlier, the band had now established another career landmark.

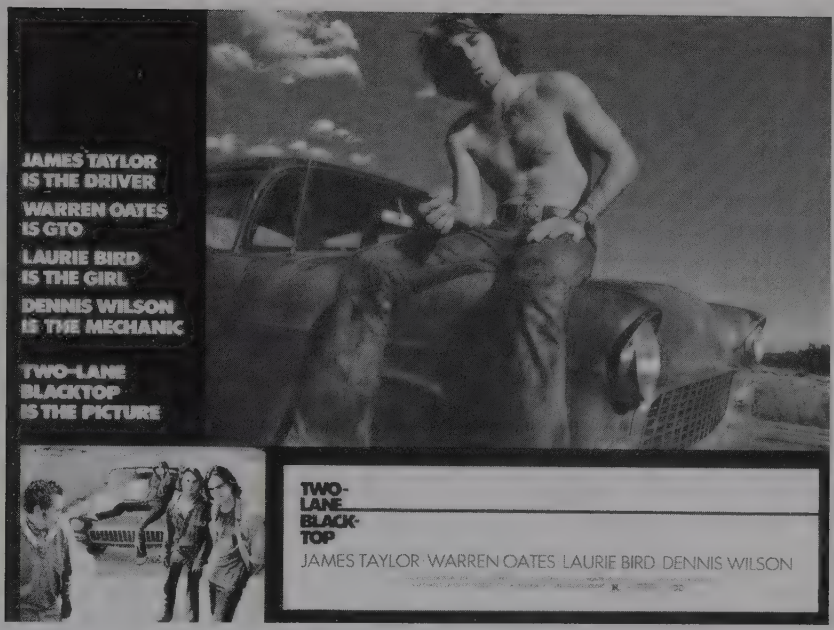
The Beach Boys again appeared on the *David Frost Show*, kicking

things off with Dennis singing "Forever." After they'd run through a silly but effective version of "Vegetables," Dennis returned to the frontman position. Carl and Al strummed acoustic guitars as Dennis crooned a lovely version of "Lady." At interview time, he discussed his upcoming movie with Frost, describing the plot: "It's about two guys who can't make a decision." He seemed pleased to inform the viewing audience that the movie would receive an R rating.

When Universal Pictures released *Two Lane Blacktop*, it foundered. Reviews were mixed, and the flick soon became a drive-in staple. Universal's hopes that it would catch on with the *Easy Rider* audience were dashed. But, like so much of the Beach Boys' music, the movie has gained popularity over time. The film that Sam Peckinpah once referred to as a "goddamn masterpiece" is today considered a cult classic, greatly admired by muscle-car collectors and movie buffs alike.

Truth be told, Dennis the actor is a much less compelling figure than Dennis the rock drummer. In *Two Lane Blacktop*, the characters of the mechanic and the driver are moody and distant by design, leaving the actors little range to explore. But Oates as GTO still manages to steal every scene he's in; and Dennis's natural magnetism does shine through. It's fun to watch Dennis working on the car like a pro — tweaking the timing, unhooking various body panels, dragging a huge hydraulic jack out of the trunk, and putting slicks on the back. He looks a bit rough, a bit greasy, and very masculine. I can remember sitting in my buddy Tom's '68 Torino GT at a drive-in and thinking "That guy on the screen reminds me of Dennis Wilson." It slowly dawned on me that this was, in fact, a more grown-up Dennis. I really hadn't paid much attention to the Beach Boys since 1967, and, like most of the world, I'd assumed they'd broken up. Then, out of the blue, there was Dennis on the silver screen. A short while later, I'd discover that the Beach Boys were still intact — and on the rise again.

The Beach Boys' image was improving so rapidly in 1971 that even hard-core counterculture types were starting to accept them. The proof came on an April night that has become inscribed in the annals of rock. The hippiest of all bands, the Grateful Dead, was transporting its audience to a new high at the Fillmore East. At the peak of the set, guitarist Jerry Garcia stepped to the microphone and



COURTESY FRANKIE VEE

announced, "Here are some fellow Californians: the Beach Boys." The shock waves that ripped through the crowd turned to euphoria when the two bands launched into a jam. Then, after performing a couple of tunes with the Dead, the Beach Boys took over. Strange days: there were the hairy, bearded Beach Boys daring the chemically altered Dead audience to dig "I Get Around." Somehow, they had made the journey from trendy (1963) to respected (1965) to progressive (1966) to washed up (1968) to nearly unknown (1970) to nostalgically trippy (1971). The audience that had previously rejected the Beach Boys for not being a part of their flower generation now seemed to be rediscovering something they had always loved. The Beach Boys made such an impact onstage at the Dead show that they were invited to play the closing-night concert at the Fillmore that summer. They also appeared on the cover of the November *Rolling Stone* — all six band members were featured, Brian looking every bit the casualty he'd become.

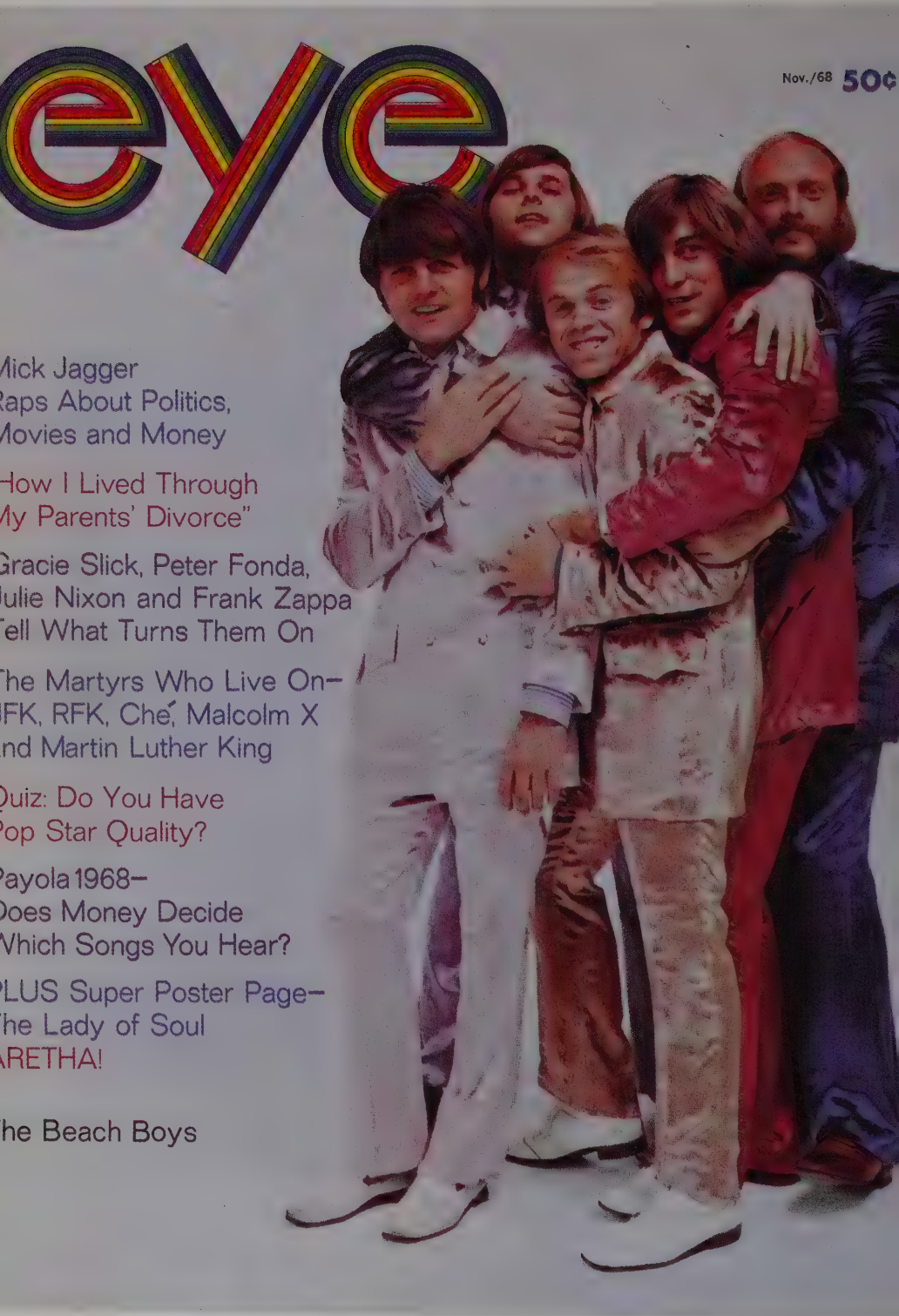
Warner/Reprise had renewed the Beach Boys' recording contract on the assumption that the band would release *Smile* at some point. The label retained the right to reissue all of the group's albums from

Pet Sounds on, and it had been assured that Brian would participate in all new recording projects. In fact, Warner would end up collecting on only one out of three of these promises. *Smile* would never be finished, and Brian would appear in the studio about as often as Bigfoot. One consolation, however, was that a legendary lost track from *Smile* would become the centerpiece of the next Beach Boys album. "Surf's Up," a gorgeously dramatic Brian Wilson production, was completed for release mainly by Carl, who enhanced the cut by adding a few final touches. Though Brian had pleaded with his bandmates to leave it locked safely away in a vault with the remainder of the *Smile* music, the Boys sensed that the track could make the difference between a good album and a hit album. When they submitted a version of the LP to Warner/Reprise that did not include "Surf's Up," the label rejected it. The Boys had proposed the title *Landlocked* for this first version of the LP, which included strong material like Dennis's "Lady" and an unusual new song from Brian called "Till I Die"; the collection included a bunch of mediocre tunes as well.

Around this time, the band found a new mentor: the mysterious Jack Rieley, who made it his mission to infuse the new album with a different kind of appeal. He wanted it to have a more environmentally conscious, politically aware thrust. The big changes that Rieley instigated met with some success, and he eventually became the group's manager — pissing a lot of people off in the process.

In the meantime, Dennis was busy writing beautiful music and planning to release a solo LP. Engineer Steven Desper revealed that "ninety percent of it was ninety percent done." During this period, Dennis performed some of his lovely new compositions — like "Barbara" and "I've Got a Friend," both of which would have stood out on any Beach Boys LP — at various Beach Boys concerts. He was developing a power-ballad style that would become his signature. The fact that much of this top-quality material would never see the light of day is dismaying. "Barbara," a song that prompted classically trained musician Daryl Dragon to say, "I never went to school with anybody who could write [like] that," languished in the vaults until it cropped up in 1998 on the soundtrack of the documentary film *Endless Harmony*. Dragon truly believes that Dennis was stifled creatively and never taken seriously by those around him: "He was a guy that

Dennis was out in front on this 1965 hit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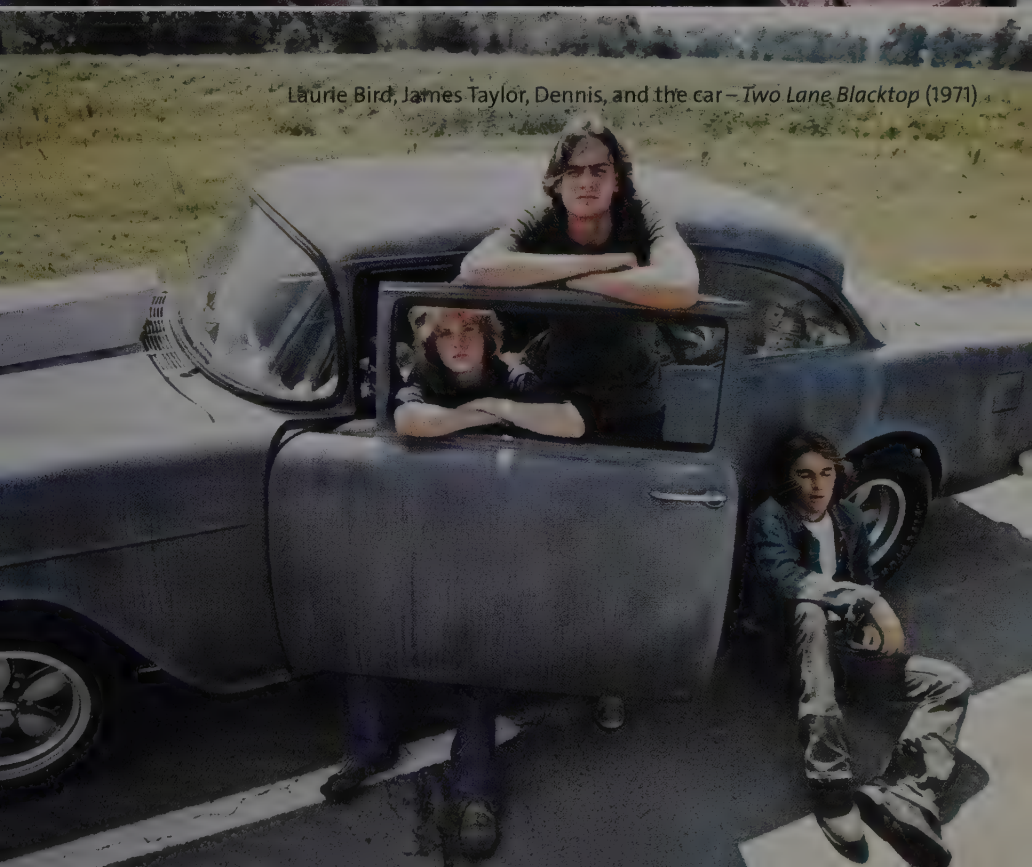
Nov./68 50¢
Mick Jagger
Raps About Politics,
Movies and Money
"How I Lived Through
My Parents' Divorce"
Gracie Slick, Peter Fonda,
Julie Nixon and Frank Zappa
Tell What Turns Them On
The Martyrs Who Live On–
JFK, RFK, Che, Malcolm X
and Martin Luther King
Quiz: Do You Have
Pop Star Quality?
Payola 1968–
Does Money Decide
Which Songs You Hear?
PLUS Super Poster Page–
The Lady of Soul
ARETHA!
The Beach Boys

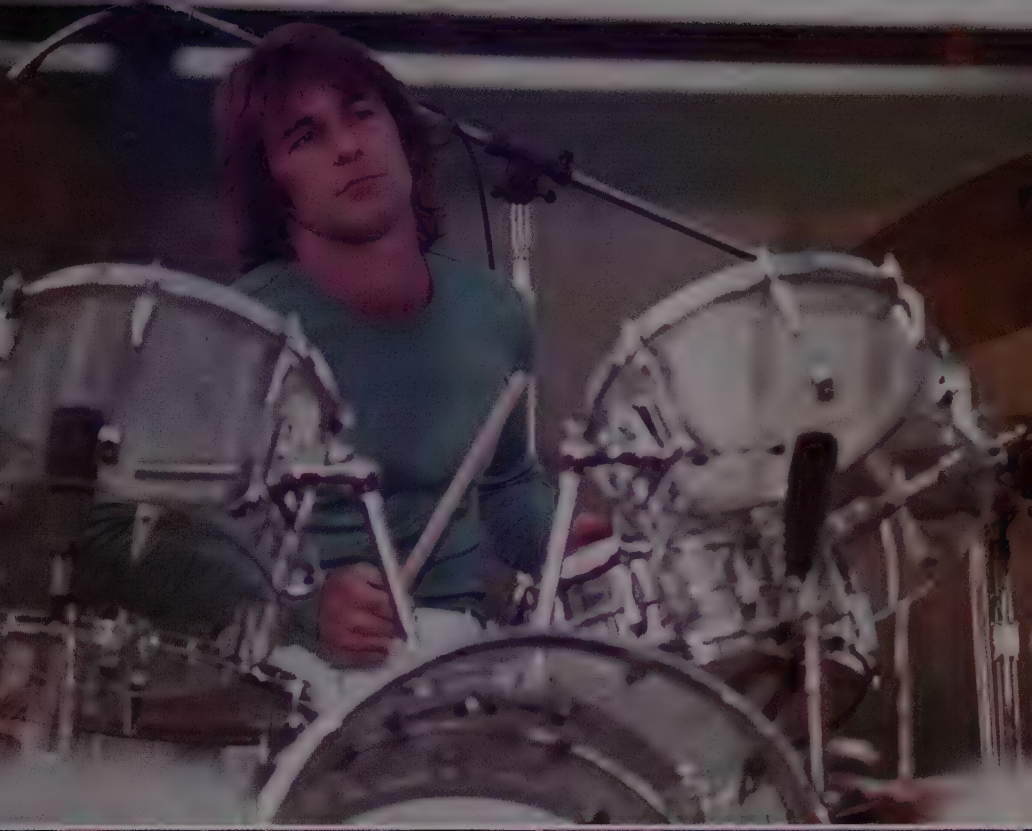
Europe, 1968

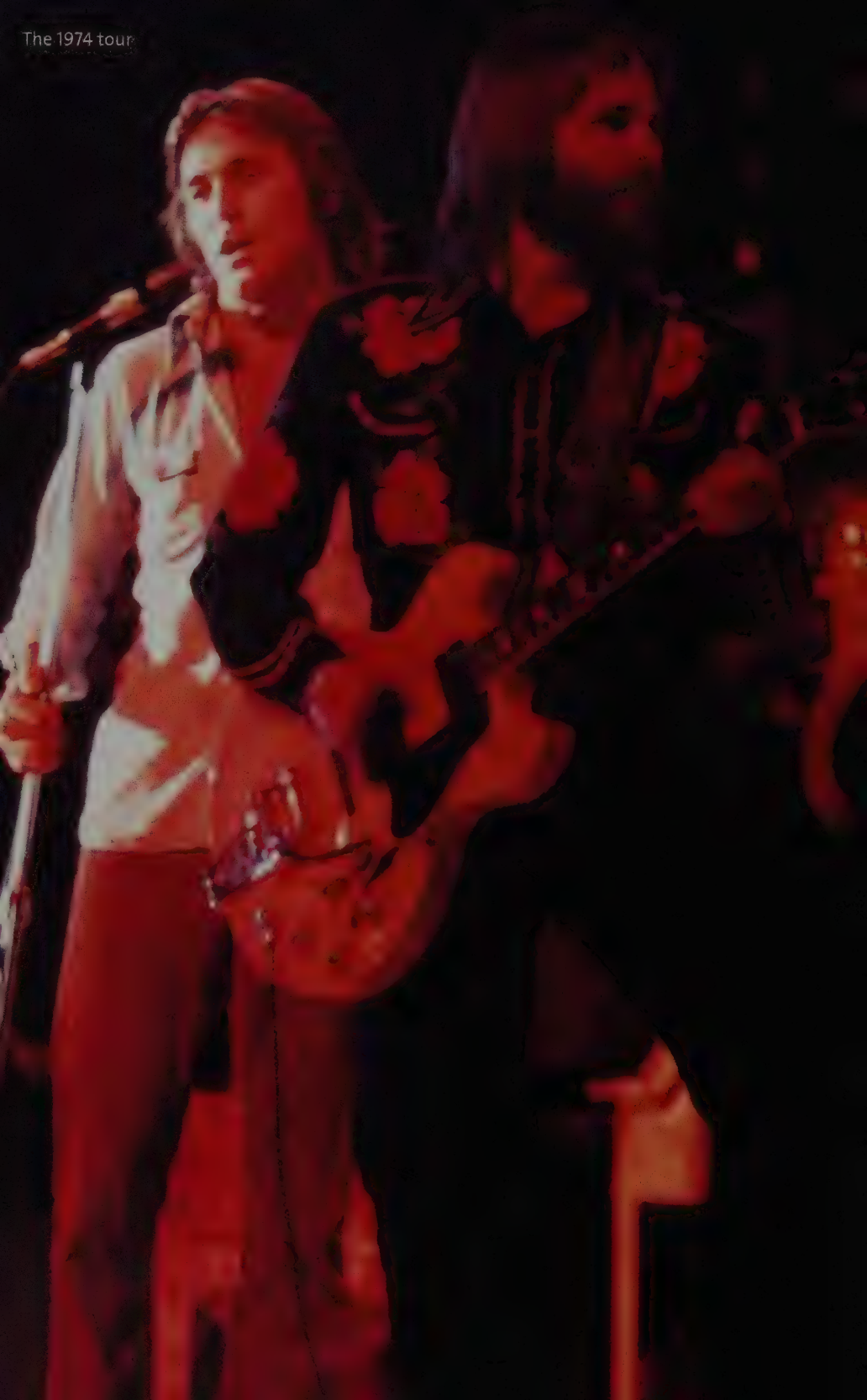
Laurie Bird, James Taylor, Dennis, and the car – *Two Lane Blacktop* (1971)



Ed Carter, Dennis, and Blondie Chaplin

German picture sleeve (1973)





Venice

Dennis and Karen Lamm on tour with the Beach Boys (1978)

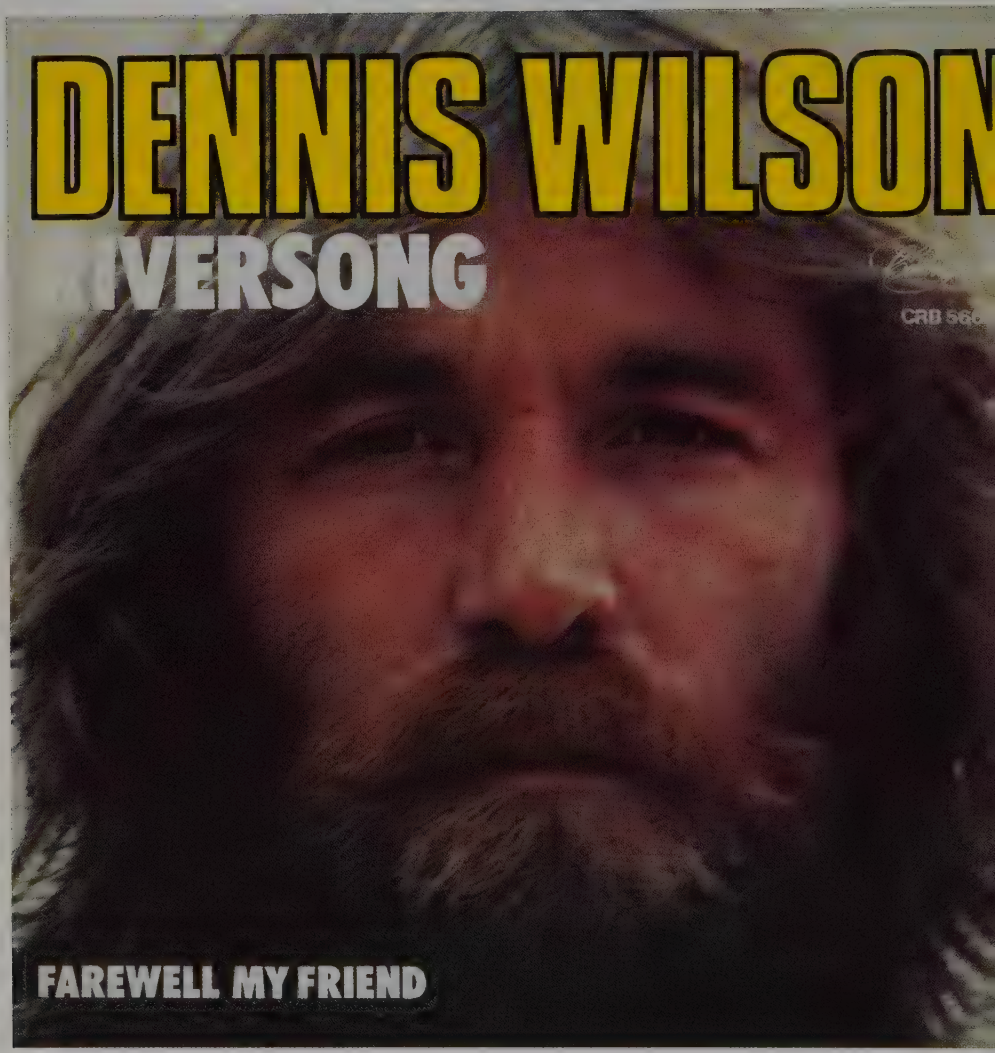
↑ Dennis and Karen: a beautiful couple

Carl and Dennis in 1976

James Guercio helped Dennis make his great statement

Hawaii, 1977

Dennis and Christine on *The Harmony* (1979)



The UK single

was not recognized for the gift that he had — because he was probably overshadowed by Brian or because he was scattered. People thought of him as a drummer and that's it, or whatever stigmas are attached to people."

Unquestionably, there were strong expressions of Dennis's increasingly fertile mind — like the adventure-themed "San Miguel" (which came to him while drinking that beer at Carl's house), or the moving ballad "Fourth of July" — that were somehow passed over, remaining unreleased for many years. As the new Beach Boys LP came together, Dennis and Dragon were completing a song titled "Old Movie," but no space was made for it in the album lineup. (Another great tune by Dennis and Daryl, named "Brand New Day," was recorded but never released.) Under the circumstances, it's no wonder that Dennis was thinking of releasing a record of his own — unfortunately, though, that dream would take another six long years to realize due to a total lack of support for Dennis's artistic vision. According to Fred Vail, although Dennis was at the height of his early-seventies creative flurry, "The Beach Boys obviously weren't buying into his songs as part of the group output." Vail goes on to describe Dennis's unreleased songs as "diamonds never cut and polished." *Landlocked* was retitled *Surf's Up*, and "Lady" as well as Dennis's other contributions were left off the final product.

When Rieley took over as manager, a power shift occurred within the band. Carl took a more active leadership role, and he reportedly disagreed with Dennis over the new LP's song lineup. In the end, Dennis barely participated in the making of *Surf's Up*; he did, however, stand alone in endorsing Brian's belief that the proposed title track should be left off the record. As Carl moved forward, producing some of the best work of his career, as Bruce Johnston discovered that he couldn't stand Rieley (consequently, his days as a Beach Boy were now numbered), as Mike and Al jumped onto Rieley's environmental bandwagon, Dennis found himself pushed aside. His main function on the *Surf's Up* project was to break the bad news to Brian. Despite Dennis's protests, the band would go against Brian's wishes and not only release his precious song but also name the LP after it. *Surf's Up* was released in August of 1971, and it became the biggest-selling Beach Boys album in years.

Then one night, Dennis, exercising typically terrible judgment,

did something that would seriously damage his career. While many said that it was all triggered by a fight he'd had with Barbara, Dennis chose to put this spin on the events of that night: "I got drunk . . . walked into the house, threw off my wife's clothes, ripped off mine. It was cold, and I went to slam the door, only we'd just moved and I'd forgotten the door was made of glass, and I put my hand right through it. You know how it is when you're drunk. Barbara saved my life by putting a tourniquet on it." Dennis's hand injury was bad — he'd severed several tendons. It would take years for him to recover to the point where he could resume his duties as the Beach Boys' regular drummer. Now, during concerts, the impulsive, physically aggressive Dennis would be reduced to sitting behind a keyboard or standing off to one side behind a microphone. It hurt him deeply. He felt like a caged animal. His drinking became worse and his participation in the band became erratic.

In the summer of 1971, not long after Dennis had sustained his injury, the Boys performed before a huge audience in New York's Central Park. A film made of this performance for a TV special records the surprise the other Beach Boys apparently experienced when Dennis showed up onstage. As they welcome him, Bruce calls out, "Dennis Wilson! He made it!" Carl then explains, "He hurt his hand." Performing "Forever," Dennis's delivery is seductive, direct, genuine — midway through, the audience is hanging on his every utterance, and when he breaks into a warm grin near the song's conclusion, certain females in the crowd can barely take it. The old charisma is intact. Then the band executes a high-flying crescendo on Dennis's "It's About Time." Able only to finger the electric piano with his good hand, Dennis still has much to offer, and the crowd happily feeds on the energy of his song.

Despite moments such as these, when Dennis would prove that no matter what, he still had the power to mesmerize an audience, his brief tenure as a leader of the Beach Boys slipped away. And though he continued to dream of breaking free from his bandmates, he would inevitably be drawn back into the fold.

The success of *Surf's Up* gave the Beach Boys a new market foothold. It reached a very respectable number twenty-nine on the album charts in the fall of 1971, partially due to the big lure of its title track.

The LP also included two of the best songs Carl ever composed: "Long Promised Road" and the deliciously phased "Feel Flows." Mike added the instantly dated "Student Demonstration Time" (the last song Dennis drummed on before injuring his hand). Bruce Johnston's *Surf's Up* contribution was one of his most universally loved tunes: "Disney Girls." With its sweet, nostalgic appeal, this refreshingly square ballad served to temper the "let's try to be hip" philosophy that had suddenly permeated the Beach Boys' world. But the big surprise on this record was Brian's fabulous "Till I Die." With his painfully original point of view, the suffering genius again proved his superiority, easily blowing all of the others away. For some bizarre reason, the original, *Landlocked* version of "Till I Die" was edited down to a much shorter version for *Surf's Up*, cheating the listener out of additional precious minutes. An often-repeated theory about this is that Mike thought the song was too depressing and insisted it be condensed.

Surf's Up could have been a truly great album, but, marred by a shallow trendiness, it is merely uneven. If a couple of Dennis's gems had been substituted for the weaker cuts, it might have made all the difference. A pattern of poor artistic decisions had begun to undermine the rich potential that bubbled beneath the group's surface. "To me, *Surf's Up* is, and has always been, one hyped-up lie," says Bruce Johnston. "It's a false reflection of the Beach Boys, and one Jack Rieley engineered right from the outset. Jack was very, very smart in that he was able to camouflage what was actually going on by making it look like Brian Wilson was more than just a visitor at those sessions." On the inside of the record sleeve are displayed an array of band-member photos, including several of the elusive Brian. Dennis, however, appears in only a single small photo: this token inclusion just magnifies his absence.

As 1972 began, the unusually stable Beach Boys personnel roster underwent a shakeup. The tension between Bruce Johnston and Jack Rieley came to a head, and Johnston was dismissed from the band. He would go on to attain success as a songwriter, winning a Grammy Award for composing Barry Manilow's megahit "I Write the Songs." To replace Johnston, and to fill in for Dennis on drums, two South African friends of Carl's were added to the group. Guitarist and

vocalist Blondie Chaplin and drummer Ricky Fataar added racial diversity to a band that some had branded as "ultra White." Both would appear on the new Beach Boys album, due out in the spring.

In the wake of these changes, the Beach Boys' stage setup became more complicated than ever. During this period, the Boys integrated as many as fifteen separate instruments into their act. One Florida appearance in the spring of 1972 was derailed when their equipment truck broke down en route to the venue. Without benefit of amps, drums, horns, or keyboards, Dennis and Carl sheepishly took the stage some two and a half hours after the concert was scheduled to begin. As a skeptical and somewhat irritated audience looked on, Carl produced an acoustic guitar. The two brothers seated themselves on stools, and Carl gently began to sing "Caroline No." When the fans continued to display their restlessness, Dennis ordered them to "Shut up and let my brother sing!" As the song finished, he broke the ice by saying, "Anybody out there got a joint?" The audience laughed, the equipment arrived, and Dennis got his joint.

Sessions for the new record began, and it became apparent that Brian was no longer able to provide the band with much-needed material. Carl became the principal studio producer. Though his songwriting was good, he was not prolific. Mike and Al had shown their abilities to be inconsistent during the making of *Surf's Up*, and Bruce was gone. So the Boys turned to Dennis as a last resort. They took two of the solo tracks that Dennis and Daryl Dragon had recorded to shore up what looked to be an otherwise weak Beach Boys album.

Titled *Carl and the Passions*, a nod to the Boys' earliest days, when they had briefly used that moniker, the LP contained a few worthy tracks. One of these was written by Brian — he kept showing that he could be asleep most of the time, stoned the rest of the time, and still do better than the others. The song was the solid rocker "Marcella," which featured a great slide-guitar sound courtesy of Blondie Chaplin. And from Dennis's never-released early-seventies solo-album sessions came the epic "Cuddle Up." Barbara Wilson remembers this song as the one that best reflects the essence of the unique bond she shared with her husband. Originally titled "Old Movie," it had been massively reworked by 1972. "Cuddle Up" is an over-the-top romantic feast, both beautiful and excessive. As a composition, it

hits a home run, but as a recording, it seems slightly overproduced. Gentle passages, heavenly group harmonies, and superlush bursts of orchestra and voice combine to give your ears and sound system all they can handle. It's not hard to imagine the VU needles fluctuating solidly in the red as Dennis the novice producer honed his techniques.

Within a few years, Dennis would demonstrate that he could corral this style and exploit it to perfection. On "Cuddle Up," he gives us so much audio information that the final result is just too dense; nevertheless, the song stands as a memorable piece of Beach Boys history and easily outshines most of the album's other tracks. Apart from the achingly emotional "Make It Good," another tune from Dennis's solo sessions, the rest of *Carl and the Passions* is forgettable, and its strange packaging adds to its tenuous aura. The front cover doesn't mention the name Beach Boys and doesn't depict the band members. This odd design strategy is a prime example of the kind of disastrous marketing decisions Warner/Reprise was making when it came to the Beach Boys. Here's another: the label also decided to piggyback a reissue of *Pet Sounds* to the new album, thereby hopelessly confusing the consumer. Inside the gatefold, the band is pictured with its new members, and a photo of Brian is pasted into the shot to make it seem as though he was actually there. Even if he was, he wasn't. The album scraped into the top fifty and then died.

Brian did manage to come out of hiding long enough to coproduce his wife and sister-in-law's LP, titled *Spring*, released on the United Artists label in July of 1972. This little-known treasure testifies to the fact that Brian could still make good things happen on occasion. It also testifies to his respect for Dennis's songwriting talents: Brian selected Dennis's song "Forever" as part of the *Spring* lineup. "Brian really liked that song," remembers Gregg Jakobson, "and that was quite a compliment to Dennis. You could hardly have a higher authority than Brian." The following April, Brian made Dennis's composition "Fallin' in Love" (Formerly "Lady") the B side of the single "Shyin' Away" by the same duo, now known as American Spring. While these records were not big sellers — most consumers were not even aware of their existence — they must have been profoundly satisfying for Dennis. For the first time, Brian was concentrating hard on *his* music, reversing the pattern that had been in place for so many years.

That year, Dennis made one of his countless forays into the great outdoors. There he had an encounter with the forces of nature that would ignite within him a vital creative spark. The context was a camping trip, and the site was the Northern California wilderness near the town of Bishop. Dennis and Barbara, with their young son Michael, Brian's daughter Carnie, and Ed and Trisha Roach pitched their tents at a picturesque spot known as Honeymoon Creek. Always eager to fish, Dennis almost immediately cast a line into the clear mountain stream. Ed, who joined Dennis with a line of his own, recalls: "Every time I cast in I was reeling in a fish. I was never a great fisherman like Dennis, but that day I was thinking, 'My God, I'm finally gonna have a time when I can outdo him!' Then I turned around and looked at Dennis and it was straight out of a Popeye cartoon. As fast as he could throw his line in, he was going, whip whap, whip whap, whip whap! I'm watching all these fish pile up next to him. They were all beautiful trout." But Dennis wasn't satisfied.

Always on the lookout for ways to up the ante, Dennis then, explains Roach, "decided that if we could damn up the river right in front of where our tents were, we could catch even more fish. Now, I don't know how much better the fishing could possibly get, but he saw a huge stump from a fallen tree on the other side. He waded across the river and started yanking this thing and then dragged me into the water to help him." Shaking his head, Roach concludes, "We worked on that thing for, like, six hours — just like beavers, packing it with mud." But their efforts were futile — the strong current kept washing away all the work they had done. An exhausted Dennis finally had to admit that his plan to contain the river had failed. That night, as he relaxed next to the campfire enjoying a meal of fresh trout, he reflected on the relentless power of that river, its ability to break free of all restraint. "Oh mighty river, I would love to be like you. . . ." A song was born.

Despite inconsistent record sales, the Beach Boys had once again become a hot concert attraction. They took advantage of their renewed popularity by touring hard in both the US and Europe. In the summer of 1972, they played an outdoor concert at the Crystal Palace Bowl in London. The audience was enormous. Their set, which went over big with the crowd, was punctuated by a gritty version of "Wild Honey" with Blondie Chaplin on lead vocal. Rock

superstars Keith Moon and Elton John joined them and it seemed as though all of Great Britain was in love with the Beach Boys. Unable to man the drums, Dennis sometimes looked lost onstage — he'd just stand around, occasionally encouraging the audience to join in. At times, he looked like he could use some encouragement himself.

The band permitted him to perform one of his lovely ballads — such as "Cuddle Up" — during some of the 1972 concerts, and he'd often succeed in bringing down the house with his emotional delivery. But this alone was not a sufficient energy release for Dennis, and he'd sometimes ignore his damaged hand and jump behind the drums, briefly commanding the attention of the audience, giving his all for a song or two — and ultimately aggravating his slowly healing injury. This was live-for-the-moment Dennis, forever hurting himself and refusing to learn from his mistakes. He'd stumble backstage, drunk and agitated, hand swollen, and his bandmates would just shake their heads. This kind of behavior took its toll on those who truly loved Dennis, like Carl and Barbara. It was becoming all too apparent that advancing age would not slow Dennis down.

During the spring of 1972, Jack Rieley, who loved Holland, somehow managed to persuade the band to record its next album there. He assured them that the country's mellow vibrations would have positive effects on their work. The undertaking would become the latest entry in the band's increasingly bizarre track record. Dennis jumped at the chance to put all those miles between him and the Manson cult, which was still terrorizing his family; a change of scenery and a relaxed recording atmosphere sounded good to him. However, the Holland idea was to turn into one of the preeminent logistical fiascoes in the history of recorded music. All of the band's fragile recording equipment was laboriously dismantled in LA, shipped to Holland, and painstakingly reconstructed at an astronomical cost. Pieces of this vast electronic puzzle were inevitably damaged in transit, and replacement parts had to be sent over from the States. Another very fragile item would also have to make the long journey: the increasingly unstable Brian Wilson. After getting off to several false starts, Brian, his bandmates, and their families all arrived at their temporary home. Soon, Dennis realized that he didn't feel comfortable living in Holland and moved to the Canary Islands. From this more conducive locale, he would fly in for the recording sessions.

The Beach Boys remained in Holland for over six months — writing, recording, and squandering huge amounts of money. The end result of the endeavor was an album titled — of course — *Holland*. While not of the caliber of *Pet Sounds* or *Sunflower*, it was a very respectable effort. A single was required to get album sales moving, so Brian came up with yet another gem, called "Sail on Sailor." The song was actually cowritten with several others, including Van Dyke Parks, and it would prove to be the Beach Boys' most popular song of the decade. Blondie Chaplin once more enriches the mix with his great slide guitar and soulful lead vocal. Its loping beat gives the tune a modern, "California Girls" feel, and when the lush group harmonies begin, the Beach Boys' signature is unmistakable. "Sail on Sailor" is the only Beach Boys song to have become a staple of FM album rock radio. This was an important niche to penetrate, and it contributed to the band's growing stature.

Other highlights on *Holland* include Carl's heartfelt tribute to the American Indian, titled "The Trader." Al did a great Brian Wilson imitation with his "California," which also garnered some FM radio play. As usual, Mike covered the good, the bad, and the ugly with some very nice and some incredibly inept contributions. His "Big Sur" is pretentious, but his and Brian's "Funky Pretty" is an effervescent tongue-in-cheek workout with a cool lyric and synthesizer part. An unlikely collaboration occurred when Mike and Dennis combined their talents to come up with "Only with You." The meeting of minds was a fruitful one — with his tender lead vocals, Carl delivers Mike's great lyrics, and Dennis's moving piano-based melody somehow comes across as both relaxed and emotional. Another first-rate Dennis Wilson contribution to *Holland* is the lazy "Steamboat," featuring a Tony Martin steel-guitar solo and Dennis's rich bass vocal. Looking back, Ricky Fataar sheds some light on how such material was refined and built into album tracks: "Dennis's songs were unique. He often came into the studio with song sketches. We would work out the parts as we jammed on the material."

The pattern that had been established with the previous Beach Boys albums persisted, and Carl produced all of the tracks except for Dennis's tunes — these Dennis produced himself. As a bonus, Brian's zany fantasy fairytale "Mt. Vernon and Fairway" was packaged with the album in the form of a separate EP. The childlike fable has its

moments; it's reminiscent of the work of Pink Floyd's Syd Barrett — his tales of gnomes and such. *Holland* sold fairly well, reaching number thirty-six on the *Billboard* LP charts in the spring of 1973. To many Beach Boys fans, it is the last high-quality, original album the group ever released. The Beach Boys were on the threshold of becoming known as an oldies band.

In the summer of 1973, the film *American Graffiti* was released. This well-timed and well-executed coming-of-age movie helped fuel a huge nostalgia trend centering on the 1950s and early 1960s. Featured prominently in its oldies-rock soundtrack were two Beach Boys classics, "Surfin' Safari" and "All Summer Long." Suddenly, that golden era of a decade earlier was vivid and desirable again. The Beach Boys found that they had become living legends. In November, they released a live double LP titled *The Beach Boys in Concert*. It documented some of their great concert performances of the previous year and contained an array of their surfing-era songs. The album sold solidly, snaring a gold record for the band.

Out of the twenty tracks that made it onto *The Beach Boys in Concert* not one was a Dennis Wilson tune. I have heard countless tapes of live Beach Boys shows from this period, and many include terrific performances of "Forever," "Lady," "Cuddle Up," "Only with You," and still others. It's a mystifying omission, and the album cover only deepens the confusion: Dennis is the only band member pictured. He grips the microphone, the stand protruding from his crotch, and thrusts it into the faces of several happy concertgoers, apparently inviting them to sing along. With this phallically charged shot, Dennis achieves another of his many firsts: he is the first, and only, Beach Boy to appear alone on one of the band's album covers. But this is small consolation for his fans — after all, he is barely heard on the record itself.

The spotlight may have passed over Dennis during the band's 1973 concerts, but he was usually in attendance. His rock-and-roll-surfer image was enhanced by his shoulder-length sun-bleached hair. Tan, handsome, and fit as ever, he continued to dress in funky beach-dude finery — and the girls screamed on. Their idol would often interrupt songs to make announcements like this: "I wanna dedicate this next song to the girl who brought me here tonight." He'd also disrupt the proceedings with long stories and jokes, many of which

would lack a punchline if he was too high. One such joke concerned President Nixon, and it could usually be relied upon to elicit laughs. The gag had Tricia Nixon holding Henry Kissinger's penis, and it severely displeased some members of the band.

Dennis's closest friends and some of his bandmates tried to alleviate the situation by encouraging him to give the drums a shot again. Tentatively, he began dabbling with the skins during rehearsals, but deep down he sensed that his damaged hand would never regain enough strength for concert drumming. According to Ricky Fataar, "Dennis could have returned to the drums sooner than he did, but he was having too much fun being up front singing with his finger in his ear"; in fact, Dennis found that being cut loose from drumming duties was tedious. One evening, to break the tedium, he shed his clothes and streaked across the stage. The audience howled in delight. Initially amused, the other Beach Boys became infuriated when Dennis started performing his streak as a regular part of the show. "We gotta get him back on the drums," Carl insisted. "It's the only way Dennis will behave."

Throughout 1974, the Beach Boys toured relentlessly and profitably. They were on their way to becoming rich again. Personnel changes were made to fuel the momentum. Blondie Chaplin was relieved of his position as a Beach Boy, but Ricky Fataar stayed on as the band's main drummer for a time. "There sometimes were double drums in 1974," remembers Fataar. "Bobby [Figueroa] or Dennis would double with me during the set whenever the mood struck them. Dennis was great to play duel drums with. He would really lock in with me." By the end of the year, the lineup had practically devolved to its 1961 incarnation. The core group (except for Brian in the case of live performances), complemented by a variety of support musicians, was essentially the founding one. Carl Wilson still covered lead guitar and vocals. Al Jardine still manned rhythm guitar and vocals. Mike Love was, as always, the main vocalist and frontman. And, finally, back in his original position as the band's full-time concert drummer, was Dennis Wilson. At last his hand had healed — suddenly he was playing better than anyone could have expected. His long wait was over, and now, as the Beach Boys played before larger audiences than they'd ever faced before, a revitalized Dennis demonstrated that he was up to the challenge.

Back on top in 1974

ED ROACH © 1974, © 1999

Spontaneity, energy, and soul were Dennis's greatest attributes as a singer

ED ROACH © 1974, © 1999

He loved the touring life — the limos, the airplanes, the new sights, sounds, and places. He had an insatiable thirst for novelty and adventure. One night on the road, accompanied by his buddy Gregg Jakobson, he snuck onto a New York City construction site and climbed the unfinished World Trade Center. The structure was over one hundred stories high, without walls or ceilings, and the stiff wind nearly blew them off. "That was Dennis," says Jakobson, who knew that keeping up with his friend often meant risking serious injury. "He loved doing the craziest things he could think of." He also loved people — people of all types. Old men in bars, handicapped concertgoers, roadies, maintenance workers, cabbies, bellhops, anyone from any walk of life, could end up, however briefly, with Dennis Wilson as their best friend.

Dennis's enormous appetite for young women was also unabated, and his marriage to Barbara suffered for it. Still, even after they'd broken up, Dennis would return to Barbara frequently, whether he was welcome or not. He regularly climbed the trellis to Barbara's second-story bedroom window at all hours of the night and beg to be let in. Patient and loving, Barbara would deal with the situation as well as she could — many times, Dennis was drunk — and then send him on his way. "Dennis was just so empty inside," Barbara confides. "He never realized what a unique person he was. He tried to fill the need any way he could. When we were living together, he loved the sense of family. The only problem was that he couldn't stay long. He always had to leave and come back."

Barbara had been Dennis's best chance at a long and peaceful life. In her, he had a partner who could understand his dire vulnerability. She was not willing to become part of the problem, however, and so she was forced to let go of Dennis before the hopelessness of it all became overwhelming. "I was graced with the knowledge there was nothing I could do," Barbara says. "I either had to accept it the way it was or move on." She moved on.

Though money was still a little tight in the Beach Boys camp in early 1974, Dennis took to roaring around LA in a one-of-a-kind Porsche. He completely reworked the original-stock 911 into a custom-bodied beauty with a full-race engine. Marilyn Wilson presented him with vanity plates bearing the moniker D LOVER. He hated the plates at first, flatly refusing to put them on the car. Later,

his resistance softened, and after he'd attached them to his sporty ride he announced, "Wow! You know, I like that!"

That Porsche was often to be seen parked near a particular Hollywood Hills residence, just above the Sunset Strip. Life at that Miller Drive house was one big party. There, musicians would go to hang out, and Dennis and his friends were always welcome. The structure was U-shaped, with three separate wings housing Van Dyke Parks, Ricky Fataar, and Lowell George of the band Little Feat. "There was constantly great live music being played in that house," remembers a friend. "You could walk in and listen to Roger McGuinn playing his old Byrds songs or Lowell belting out a tune or a bunch of them jamming together. The place was magical." It was also a haven for those looking to get high on more than just the groovy sounds.

The always-accommodating inhabitants of the Miller Drive house decided that the time had come to throw the party to end all parties. Days in advance, the city's rock elite began preparing themselves for what would certainly be a raging Hollywood blowout. When the big night finally arrived, Dennis and Ed and Trisha Roach squeezed into the two-seater Porsche and sped off to Miller Drive. They arrived stylishly late, around midnight, and were immediately confronted with a parking problem. The streets were overflowing with cars and people. New arrivals cruised the area hunting down elusive parking spots. Swiftly, Dennis evaluated the situation and took action. He calmly lit a book of matches, tossed it into some nearby shrubbery, and yelled, "The canyon's on fire! The canyon's on fire!" "All of a sudden, you could hear everybody screaming," says Ed Roach. "I'm watching this thing take off like it's gonna be another major California fire." Throngs of panicky party guests scurried to safety like rats. "Everyone ran out and jumped in their cars to get them the hell out of there," remembers Roach. Then Dennis swung the Porsche around and tore up the street, the fire raging behind him. Directly in front of the party house, he pulled into a recently vacated space, parked, and said, "Let's party!" The fire was out within minutes — fortunately, no damage was done.

Once inside, Dennis went from room to room sampling the party "favors" that others had abandoned in the scramble to save themselves and their cars. As the shaken revelers slowly trickled back to party central, the festivities heated up again. Dennis and his friends

The Beach Boys receiving their gold record for *Endless Summer*

KEITH REEVES ARCHIVE

settled in for an unforgettable night, one Dennis would soon immortalize in song. He recorded a wonderful duet with Gerry Beckley of America celebrating their Miller Drive memories — on it, he passionately shouts, "Goddamn! Took a trip up Miller Drive." As he and Beckley trade off lead vocals, the listener is drawn to the attractive contrast in their singing styles — it all works beautifully. The song, however, was never released; its repeated taking of the Lord's name in vain ensured that the public would never hear it, but it was a fitting tribute to one of LA's all-time greatest musician's headquarters.

Capitol Records had been spewing out a steady stream of Beach Boys repackages since 1966, and now that the band's popularity was on the rise, the label had no intention of slowing down. In the summer of 1974, with the help of Mike Love, Capitol put together the best Beach Boys compilation ever. Bearing the title Mike had suggested, *Endless Summer*, this double LP contained twenty Brian Wilson classics, encapsulating the best of the band's early years. Then a good promotional campaign and impeccable timing caused the unthinkable to happen: *Endless Summer* took off. It was to become

the biggest-selling Beach Boys record of all time. Every high-school kid with a turntable seemed to own a copy. Every college kid whose record collection included the Doobie Brothers, the Eagles, and Elton John just had to have *Endless Summer*, too. The album crossed over everywhere, and by the time you could say "be true to your school," it had gone double platinum.

This unprecedented success had a weird effect on Brian. On the one hand, he appreciated the adulation. On the other hand, he was by now a 250-pound tragic shell of a man desperate to hide from the world, and *Endless Summer* would surely lead to all kinds of intrusions on his isolation. The sudden exposure freaked him out. Mike Love, of course, was gleeful — this hit meant big business. It didn't seem to bother him that the fate of the band was now sealed: the Beach Boys were an oldies group. End of story. They could sit back, trade on their nostalgia, and never worry about creating anything new again.

Dennis hadn't really scrapped his plans for a solo album. The fire was still burning, and he never stopped recording. If the band opted to use only a small amount of his material, he wouldn't let it get to him. He would bide his time, stockpile his songs, and wait for the right moment. When the band moved its recording equipment out of Brian's house and into its own state-of-the-art studio in Santa Monica, the structure of his life shifted. Brother Studio was an ideal work site for Dennis — he still loved to surf and be at the beach, so he was usually to be found in that part of LA anyway. He and Carl would eventually acquire the shares in Brother Studio held by the rest of the band, and some of Dennis's finest work would be created there.

Approaching thirty, Dennis was still determined to continue his quest for artistic growth and freedom. Just as he had during the golden era of the band, he now felt that the path that led onward was the only one to follow. Of course, this ideal would be nearly impossible for him to implement if he remained a Beach Boy, but Dennis loved the fans and he loved the adulation. He couldn't yet risk losing that. So for now he waited, writing his songs and having a good time. After all, with *Endless Summer* perched at number one — in the midst of one of the longest chart runs of any record ever — the Beach Boys as a unit had again become a household name.

COURTESY NICK BOUGAS

6 CHARLIE DON'T SURF

"No, NEVER. As long as I live, I'll never talk about that." This would be a typical response from Dennis Wilson when he was asked about his onetime friend and house guest Charles Manson. In 1968, Dennis had separated from his first wife, Carole, and rented a large house at the west end of Sunset Boulevard near Will Rogers State Park. One day, while driving his Ferrari along the Pacific Coast Highway, he picked up two young female hitchhikers. He took these hippie waifs back to his house to have sex with them. This was nothing out of the ordinary for Dennis — everyone who knew him was aware that he was constantly on the prowl for women. His wealth and his celebrity status only boosted his success rate. This time, however, a brief sexual indulgence would trigger a series of happenings that would permanently strip him of all remaining traces of his innocence. When Dennis invited Patricia Krenwinkle and her friend Ella Jo Bailey into his home that afternoon, the Devil followed them through the door.

That night, returning home late from a recording session at Brian's, Dennis found his house filled with naked hippie girls. They were dancing and partying. Out of the shadows appeared a wiry, elflike man with a wicked sparkle in his eyes. Charles Manson was a thirty-three-year-old career criminal who had spent most of his life in jail; he referred to the state prison as "Daddy." He was also a powerful philosopher, prophet, and charismatic guru to his devoted followers — he owned their souls. Manson generated an undeniable electricity. He challenged people constantly, making himself repulsive to some

and alluring to others. Gregg Jakobson says that "Charlie and Dennis were very much alike in many ways, and that's why they were drawn to one another." According to Jakobson, who knew both men well, the main difference between them was that Dennis had a well-developed heart and Manson didn't possess a heart at all.

Manson easily commanded the attention of the thrill-seeking Dennis, and for a year he would tirelessly exploit his famous new friend. And Dennis, of course, would take advantage of Manson in his own way. He spent much of 1968 enjoying the pleasures of the flesh that Manson's young female devotees provided, and for months his house was the site of an ongoing psychedelic orgy.

A member of the Manson "family," Sandra Good, explains, "Dennis wanted to live with us. He was gonna just drop everything and come and be with us, whether it was in a tent, or whatever. And his brothers basically said, 'You know you're bound by contract, and if you renege we're gonna have you committed. We're gonna get psychiatric testimony that you've flipped your lid, and so you're a slave to this contract,' and that was that." Good emphatically adds, "Dennis loved Charlie."

One of the few interviews Dennis gave that included comments about Manson was to *Rave* magazine in 1968 (reprinted in Nick Wise's *The Beach Boys in Their Own Words*), well before the 1969 mass-murder spree through which the Manson family became a grisly part of the public consciousness. "Fear is nothing but awareness," Dennis told his interviewer. "I was only frightened as a child because I did not understand fear, the dark, being lost, what was under the bed. It came from within. Sometimes the wizard frightens me, Charles Manson who is another friend of mine who says he is God and the Devil. He sings, plays, and writes poetry and may be another artist for Brother Records." Dennis saw something unique in Manson, and he believed that Manson had real talent as a lyricist. "The thing that Dennis loved about Manson was that he had such a spontaneous side to him," remembers Jakobson. "Charlie could sit down with a guitar and start singing about the flies buzzing around his head and make it kind of interesting." "The last thing Charlie wanted was a music career, but everybody wanted to have him at their party," recalls Sandra Good, who has described Manson's creativity as boundless.

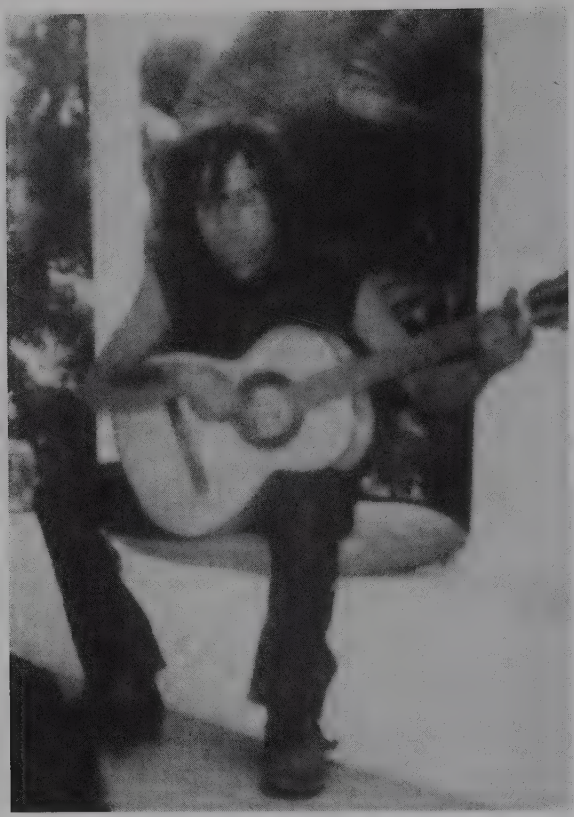
During this period, Dennis was often under the influence of LSD and a variety of other mind-altering substances. He believed he had twice been the victim of "dosing" — the practice of slipping LSD into the food or drink of an unsuspecting person. At one point, he told friends that he believed Mike Love had been the first to play this appalling trick on him, in retaliation for Dennis having a fling with Mike's wife, Suzanne. The second individual to victimize Dennis in this way was Charlie, who fed him a huge dose of the chemical. "Dennis was never quite the same after that," said a close friend. "It really changed his whole personality."

With Manson as his tour guide, Dennis embarked on a journey to the dark recesses of the human mind — Brian had stumbled upon a similarly frightening energy while conducting his drug-fueled *Smile* sessions. Searching for meaning behind the fear, Dennis flirted with whatever danger presented itself. "At first it was fun," he confided to a friend, "then Charlie started getting weird." Manson allegedly held a knife to Dennis's throat on more than one occasion. Dennis would boldly shout, "Do it!" Manson, grinning furiously, would then slowly move the blade away, and the two would fall down, laughing.

Dennis had always wanted to know what existed on the other side. Brian has said that when he was younger, Dennis would go out and look under the lids of trashcans, "just to see what was inside." The irrepressible energy that had compelled Dennis to surf, the lust for adventure that had compelled him to race cars and engage in virtually every form of outdoor activity, took on a lethal edge in the late sixties. When the quest for new thrills turned inward, fed by chemical substances and characterized by unbridled debauchery, the stakes clearly rose. But Dennis didn't really understand any of this — he just thought he was having fun.

One thing that had a profound effect on his behavior throughout his life was the guilt he felt at becoming so wealthy so young. He didn't feel that he deserved it, and he compensated by being overly generous to friends — and even to complete strangers. He gave away several fortunes, and when, in his final years, he squandered the last of his money, he expected others to afford him the same treatment. Most did.

In 1968, cash had been rolling in for awhile, and Dennis's spending habits were as flagrant as ever. The Manson family had never had



This is the only known photograph of Charles Manson in Dennis's house (1968)

COURTESY NICK BOUGAS

it so good, and they greedily sucked all they could from the easiest mark in LA. The material losses had no effect on Dennis — his need to divest himself of his earnings seemed as intense as the Manson clan's eagerness to help him out. His bad judgment had reached its zenith, and many in the Beach Boys camp could barely stand to witness it. While there were reports that some of the other Beach Boys had participated in the sexual shenanigans going on at Dennis's house, a quickie in the shower with Squeaky Fromme did not amount to an embrace of Manson. "Actually, I don't think his brothers liked us too much," says Sandra Good. "Their wives were kind of threatened by us." When Dennis tried to get the others to take Manson seriously as a musician, they immediately made themselves scarce.

Dennis eventually brought Charlie over to Brian's studio to cut some demos. The unlucky engineer of those sessions was Steven Desper. Manson had always had a problem with "the Man," and to him Desper, who was an authority on the recording process, represented just that. The electronics expert was clearly shaken by his encounter with the future mass murderer. He gamely endured hours of recording with Manson, but when a knife was produced at the studio, Desper called it quits.

Dennis and Gregg Jakobson took Manson to the Whisky A Go Go one night, where his demonic antics terrified even the jaded nightclub crowd. A witness remembers the occasion like this: "Charlie started flailing around the dance floor in an amphetamine-driven rage. His eyes were like huge black mirrors, reflecting the fear right back at anyone who looked. Everybody got the hell away from him." The Whisky dance floor emptied, and Manson danced on alone.

Incomprehensibly, Dennis actually encouraged his mother to stop by his house to meet Charlie and his followers. When she arrived on his doorstep, Dennis greeted her with, "Come on in and meet them, Mom. They're nice." Audree Wilson came face to face with Charles Manson in her son's backyard. "He was wearing a long robe, and I thought he looked older than he was supposed to be," she recalls. "I thought he had a kind face." When the story of the killing spree broke, Audree "was absolutely horrified, terrified."

Too slowly, it dawned on Dennis that Charles Manson was bad news, and he tried to slip out of the ties that bound them without angering the quick-tempered little man. The Beach Boys' touring schedule during the second half of 1968 was a blessing in this regard: Dennis was rarely in town. Without telling Charlie and the family — who were still occupying his house — he moved to different digs in the Palisades and allowed the lease to expire right out from under them. Manson had to move back to the desert site where he and his family often holed up — Spahn Ranch — and then shuttle back and forth to LA. He was preoccupied with tracking Dennis down. From time to time, he'd find him, and on these occasions he would demand money and try to pressure Dennis into joining the family full time; Manson also wanted Dennis to recruit his friends. Dennis moved again, this time to an apartment below Gregg Jakobson's house in Benedict Canyon.

One day, Fred Vail was at the apartment talking with Dennis when a wild-looking Manson burst in ordering Dennis to provide him with food and clothing. As Dennis sat by passively, Charlie cleaned out the refrigerator and then the clothes closet. When Vail asked, "Who is that creep?" Dennis coolly replied, "Fred, you don't even want to know." Los Angeles DJ Rodney Bingenheimer recalls Dennis actually hiding from Manson when Manson came looking for him at the Beach Boys' offices on Hollywood Boulevard. Carl told friends that Manson family member Tex Watson had trashed Dennis's beloved Cobra and then sold the parts to raise some quick cash. Watson was also said to be responsible for totaling Dennis's Ferrari and his Mercedes, while several of Manson's girls had destroyed Dennis's Rolls Royce. Their rage was building.

A friend of Dennis's was also being harassed by Manson. Terry Melcher was a very talented and successful producer, who'd worked with the Byrds and Paul Revere and the Raiders. He was also the son of actress Doris Day. Bruce Johnston and Melcher had partnered as Bruce and Terry, making some early surf and hot-rod records, and Melcher had a long-standing relationship with the Beach Boys. When Dennis and Gregg Jakobson suggested that he listen to demos of Charlie's material, Melcher and Manson became acquainted.

At first, Melcher seemed somewhat impressed by Charlie's music, but he thought that an essential commercial element was missing — he didn't share Dennis's opinion that Charlie had potential as a recording artist. Manson became enraged when it was finally made clear to him that Melcher had written him off. When Manson issued threats, Melcher was astute enough to take them seriously, and he moved out of his house. Then, after ranting for months about his "helter skelter" plans for triggering a race war with a series of murders, Charles Manson and his loyal acolytes enacted this sick fantasy.

On August 9, 1969, the new occupants of Melcher's former home, at 10050 Cielo Drive, were brutally slaughtered. Among the victims was actress Sharon Tate, the pregnant wife of director Roman Polanski. She had been attacked so savagely that her murderer, Tex Watson, had badly injured his hand. He'd hacked her to ribbons with a large knife. Her shattered bones had pierced the hand of her executioner. An unlucky visitor to the house that night was Jay Sebring, hairdresser to the stars — the man who had created Brian's and

Dennis's striking pompadours in early 1964. Sebring died trying to protect Tate.

The next day, the Manson family, still clamoring for blood, continued its rampage, this time at a residence in the Griffith Park area. They scrawled cryptic slogans on the crime-scene walls with the blood of their prey and left a dinner fork plunged into the head of one victim. These horrific killings, which became known as the Tate-LaBianca murders, shocked the world. The chilling details were broadcast far and wide. Los Angeles residents were on edge for months. Manson and his crew would not be implicated until November, but Dennis and some of his friends harbored a sickening suspicion. "We had a sense something was going on," says Fred Vail. "It was really eerie."

One night in September of 1969, Ed and Trisha Roach went to see Dennis at his apartment below Gregg Jakobson's house. A mild Santa Ana wind was blowing. The Tate-LaBianca murders were only a few

Ed Roach and Dennis one month after the Tate-LaBianca murders — Manson was still a free man

ROACHCLIPS ARCHIVE (PHOTO BY TRISHA ROACH)

weeks old, and the mood throughout Southern California was one of horrified anxiety. Adding to the tension among this particular group of people was the fact that Jakobson's wife had just lost their baby during childbirth. Dennis was devastated. Gently, he began to play the piano for his friends, and as he did a spirit of healing seemed to emanate from his music. Just then, Trisha felt a coldness fill the room. Before she could react, the door burst open and there was Charlie. "He had on a big sombrero, and his eyes were rolling in different directions," remembers Ed. This terrifying apparition sucked up all of those fragile, positive, music-generated vibes, leaving Dennis and friends deflated and weak. "I've just been to the moon!" shouted Charlie. He quickly vanished back into the night, but from that moment on, Dennis was convinced that he would never be able to free himself completely from this incarnation of evil.

Returning home from a Beach Boys tour in November, Dennis was immediately taken in by the police for questioning. They finally had Manson and his followers in custody and were attempting to unravel their twisted actions. Dennis gave the district attorney little information, and when it became apparent that he would be only mildly cooperative, the police went looking for what they needed elsewhere. The DA did tell the badly shaken Beach Boy to keep his doors locked, because some of Manson's cult remained at large. The warning was unnecessary.

Dennis had been reluctant to assist the police for one very compelling reason: he and his family had already been threatened by Manson. After the murders, but before the family had been charged, Manson and his people had systematically terrorized Dennis, his family, and his friends. A close friend of Dennis's reveals that "They would leave bullets in his house and write little notes that really scared the shit out of us." One such note simply read, "You can't get away from me."

Fear overwhelmed Dennis. Finally, something had knocked his cocksure attitude right out of him. He agonized over the fate of those who had been senselessly butchered by his former friend: "I think of Roman and those wonderful people who had a beautiful family." He was desperately worried about his own loved ones, who would remain in danger for years to come. Manson was a powerful man, and he had many followers who were still running around free. They would

sneak into the homes of Dennis and their other "enemies" while the inhabitants were sleeping and move the furniture around. They called this activity "creepy crawling," and it had its desired effect on those who were subjected to it. One morning, Dennis awoke to find his grand piano in a different part of the house from where it had been when he went to sleep. Later, when a friend remarked on how disturbing that story was, Dennis told him one that was far more chilling: "One night, Barbara and I woke up, and there were people in the room holding knives over us." Then the shadowy figures disappeared into the darkness, laughing. Dennis had danced with the Devil and lived to tell about it — but tell all he never would.

In the midst of all this turmoil, the Beach Boys and their publicity people had become disgusted. That free-living, out-of-control Dennis had finally done it: he'd ruined the group's shiny all-American image. They did everything possible to sweep the Manson connection under the rug. No band member would comment on it publicly for years. After the dust had settled, it became clear that the original California surfer boys had prevailed: not even Charles Manson could kill the image of the Beach Boys. Facing down the horror with questionable humor, one band member was quoted as saying, "We've got several tapes of Charlie and the girls that Dennis cut. . . . Just chanting, fucking, sucking, barfing. Maybe we'll put it out in the fall. Call it 'Death Row.'" These tapes are sealed away in the Beach Boys archives.

When *Rolling Stone* did an extensive two-issue feature on the Beach Boys in 1971, reporter Tom Nolan attempted to get Dennis to open up about his Manson days. But his life and the fortunes of the band were on the upswing, and Dennis felt no compulsion to tell all, to open fresh wounds. He did, however, admit that Manson had written the original version of the song "Never Learn Not to Love," which the Beach Boys had released as the flip side of their single "Bluebirds over the Mountain" in 1968. When Nolan tried to push a little further by asking, "Why didn't you give [Manson] the label credit?" Dennis gave this terse reply: "He didn't want that. He wanted money instead. I gave him about a hundred thousand dollars worth of stuff." Suddenly, Dennis realized he was letting slip far more than he wanted to, and interjected, "I don't think you should put that in your story. I see no reason the story should mention him at all." Yet every story ever written about Dennis Wilson or the Beach

After his association with Manson, Dennis would never look at the world the same way

KEITH REEVES ARCHIVE

MARK SULLIVAN

Boys from the time of Manson's arrest on would include mention of the infamous Charles Manson. The contrast between innocence and evil so vividly captured in the Beach Boys/Manson connection was just too intriguing to be left alone. "Dennis just wanted to put it behind him," says Fred Vail, but a story that sensational was destined to take on a life of its own in the course of time.

Today, a certain strata of youth culture has actually embraced Manson as a kind of psychotic antihero, the ultimate horror-movie villain — but even better, because Manson was the real thing. A shoddy album of Manson's ultraprimitive music, released in the early seventies to cash in on the morbid curiosity generated by the press, was reissued in the nineties. The multiplatinum-selling band Guns and Roses even covered one of his tunes — strangely enough, following in the footsteps of the Beach Boys. Young people have been seen wearing T-shirts with Manson's diabolical image emblazoned on them. Many members of the current "Brian Wilson is God" contingent — clearly shallow bandwagon jumpers — think it's really cool that Charles Manson had a Beach Boys connection. Dennis would

have been sickened by it all. To befriend a monster out of ignorance is one thing; to celebrate him after he has been convicted of orchestrating the slaughter of innocents, of killing for thrills, is quite another. And someone who truly loved his fellow beings, as Dennis did, would be the first to rail against it. The pain and remorse he experienced in the wake of the Tate-LaBianca murders was authentic. He profoundly regretted the lack of judgment that had allowed him to be drawn into the Manson family's bloody vortex. He suffered the guilt of the survivor.

In the end, it comes down to this: Dennis Wilson was a big, rich, famous, ridiculously trusting kid. He was a natural conduit that Manson could exploit in his desire to realize his previously thwarted musical aspirations. Dennis was not evil. He was not psychotic. He bore no real hatred for anyone. Through the combined effects of bad luck and bad judgment, he became a stepping stone for evil. Dumb angel indeed. Upon hearing of Dennis's death, Manson was quoted as saying, "Dennis Wilson was killed by my shadow because he took my music and changed the words from my soul."

7 PACIFIC OCEAN BLUE

Dennis wilson found the love of his life in 1974, and it wasn't a woman. He had fallen head over heels for a sixty-two-foot sailing vessel, which he aptly christened *The Harmony*. This vintage beauty was a unique and tastefully balanced combination of mahogany, teak, brass, and other top-quality materials. She fired Dennis's imagination.

To date, he had already bought, sold, wrecked, and given away a whole range of fine, and extremely expensive, automobiles. Over the years, Dennis had been the proud owner of Corvettes, Ferraris, Porsches, Rolls Royces, Mercedes, BMWs, an AC Cobra, a Jaguar XKE, and several campers and trucks. Not to mention fleets of motorcycles and several speedboats, including a large, seaworthy cabin cruiser. Whatever his heart desired, his checkbook could acquire. But none of these costly toys could compare to the massive and majestic *Harmony*.

Although huge amounts of cash would have to be poured into it — the vessel needed refurbishing and maintenance; the docking fees were staggering — no single object ever brought Dennis more personal enjoyment. The quintessential Beach Boy finally had the perfect instrument through which to experience the Pacific Ocean to the ultimate degree. Dennis worked tirelessly on *The Harmony* over the next few years. The chores he assigned himself were so strenuous that his already well-developed muscles became even more impressively defined. The veteran surfer boy took on a rougher, wind-burned appearance due to his regular sailing excursions. His long hair stayed sun bleached year-round, and he let his heavy beard grow.

Dennis on *The Harmony* — the true love of his life

KEITH REEVES ARCHIVE

He began to emanate a rugged-man-of-the-sea, rogue-adventurer kind of appeal — authentic enough for a man who was, in fact, an explorer on many levels. Now, as owner of *The Harmony*, he could head out to sea whenever the spirit moved him. He could live aboard the vessel and rarely come off his cherished Pacific Ocean.

At about this time, the Wilson brothers were forced to face up to a complex transition. They had to accept the loss of their blustery, sometimes violent, father — the man who had fostered their interest in music and gotten them their first recording contract. In 1973, Murry Wilson died of a heart attack. His sons would continue to feel his influence, both positively and negatively, long after he was gone. Before he passed away, in a moment of almost unfathomable shortsightedness, Murry had sold the publishing rights to the Beach Boys' early catalog for a fraction of their value. Over time, as that material became a staple of our culture, the magnitude of his blunder was revealed.

A perplexing figure, Murry could be both cruel and nurturing to his children. He beat them and generously shared with them his love for melody and harmony. Dennis had grown closer to his dad near the end of his life, and he never stopped trying to find a way to love

him. "My father was a mean son of a bitch, but he would melt when he heard us sing," Dennis would say. "The last couple days of his life he's lying in bed dying going, 'Son! You've got to play more rock n' roll! Listen to this melody!' He'd get so excited."

Dennis recorded an eerie song called "Carry Me Home" shortly before Murry passed away. Its lyrics unfold a tale of slow death, and of all the Beach Boys' songs it is the most expressive of emotional pain. Dennis's moving composition speaks of his longing to be reconciled with his father and the fear involved in accepting the inevitability of death. The lead vocals were shared by Dennis and Blondie Chaplin, sustaining a tone of deep mourning. Some reviewers stated that this unreleased recording was made during the late seventies; it was, however, completed by 1973. Dennis maintained that the song was intended as a *Holland* track but was left out of the final lineup. "Carry Me Home" is one more superior Dennis Wilson composition that was passed over by the band, denied a place within its body of recorded work.

Yet another important figure was to leave the Beach Boys' orbit during this period. When they returned to the US from Holland, Jack Rieley decided to stay behind. He was officially relieved of his management duties, and his controversial reign ended as abruptly as it had started. Waiting in the wings to take over as business manager was Mike's younger brother, Stephen Love, who had actually been a Beach Boys employee for some time. His increasing influence would gradually become a nightmare for Dennis.

Still, the Beach Boys machine had to be kept up and running. In 1974, with *Endless Summer* on its way to becoming the number-one record in the country and their popularity as a live act reaching new heights, the Beach Boys were only missing one element: Brian Wilson. Warner/Reprise, the other band members, and a legion of fans wanted him back. What they failed to realize was that the Brian they wanted no longer existed. The Boys had to move ahead without him. They were now, undoubtedly, among the hottest concert attractions in the world. Another extremely popular act, the veteran jazz-rock group Chicago, would join them in the coming year for what would turn out to be one of the most lucrative tours of all time.

Billed as Beachago, the two bands explored a common thread in their music; both had a very American sound, one representing the

West and the great outdoors, the other representing the East and the urban experience. They complemented each other beautifully. Chicago had scored a huge hit the previous year with "Wishin' You Were Here," which prominently featured the unmistakable Beach Boys harmony sound. Dennis, Carl, and Al were credited as background vocalists, and this would be the closest thing to a new Beach Boys record to come out in 1974. The mastermind of this collaboration was James William Guercio, who had recently played bass with the Beach Boys in concert. Guercio was actually best known as the talented producer of Chicago's string of hit recordings. He was also a successful film producer and an influential presence at CBS Records. He had been brought into the picture by Dennis, who, once again, was altering the direction of the band by befriending a dynamic personality. This time, his actions paid off in dollars: the 1975 summer tour drew an average of over fifty thousand heads per show.

According to Fred Vail, "Jimmy Guercio tried very hard to revitalize the band," and his efforts apparently worked. The confidence of each member seemed to grow. "My job [was] to make them feel ten feet tall," says Guercio, who essentially managed the Beach Boys to even greater prominence. His onstage presence playing bass bolstered an already dynamite live act, and Guercio loved the job. "Dennis and I really worked well together," he remarks, referring to the vital interaction between bassist and drummer. That summer, Beachago went head to head with the Rolling Stones tour in several markets, and the collaborative act came out on top. The Beach Boys also did some knockout overseas shows at about this time, including a legendary one at Wembley Stadium. "I remember when we went to London and played that show with Elton John, the Eagles, and Rufus, and just annihilated everybody there," says Bobby Figueroa. "This was when Elton was at his peak. We just got up there and kicked everybody's ass."

This latest surge in popularity replenished the Beach Boys' coffers, and *Rolling Stone* put the exclamation point on a phenomenal twelve months by naming them its Band of the Year. All of this had occurred despite the fact that an album of new Beach Boys material hadn't been released in years. It was the sheer power of their live presentation that had propelled them back to the top. Their profile had never been higher, their mystique was deepening, and the world was

Dennis and Karen having a laugh

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clamoring for the Beach Boys to get into the studio and create some new music. "I was talking to Brian the other day about the fact that the Beach Boys hadn't released a record in a long while," Dennis told the press. "And he said, 'Well good things take time.'" The time for Brian and the Boys to reunite could not be postponed any longer.

Throughout this period, Dennis was conducting a torrid romance with a beautiful model/actress named Karen Lamm. The tempestuous energy they generated would give rise to some of Dennis's best music ever. Karen was a perfect California "10," with long blond hair, fiery blue eyes, a beach-bunny body, and an intriguing wild streak. She had previously been married to Chicago's Robert Lamm, and she thrived on the Hollywood and rock-and-roll cultures. At last, Dennis had a woman who could share his penchant for the fast life. "We were so out of control," says Karen, who goes on to describe their life together as "a very wild existence." A veteran industry insider once described Karen as "one of those good-looking, arrogant women who exist to plague men in rock and roll and cinema." He also claimed she was "smart, aggressive, combative, and would never back down," even comparing her personality to that of Murry Wilson. Whether

or not this comparison holds up, one thing is certain: Karen Lamm was the only woman Dennis was ever involved with who could attract as much attention as he did.

Brian would often tease Karen, telling her she was too good for Dennis — sometimes provoking the ire of his younger brother. The couple moved into a two-story, five-bedroom house at 31284 Broad Beach Road, just north of Malibu. There they lived a fairytale existence, often anchoring *The Harmony* offshore to allow themselves full access to the sea. "Dennis would get up in the morning and go diving in the ocean to spear halibut," laughs Karen. "He'd wake me up holding this huge fish." Those days, Karen says, were the happiest of her life: "I had never been loved the way he loved me."

Karen acted both on TV and in feature films; she was also under contract to Clairol, Maybelline, Benson and Hedges, and several other major companies. She had the look that everyone wanted — in today's lingo, she was a supermodel. Using her influence as a familiar face in print and television ads, Karen managed to get Dennis into a fashion layout that ran in a national magazine. (On one occasion, she actually lost a lucrative cosmetics contract because of Dennis's earlier association with Charles Manson.)

The press reported on Karen and Dennis's every move. There were sensational reports of their fights, involving bricks thrown through windows, stray gunfire, and one Ferrari burned to a crisp. Of course, such incidents only seemed to consolidate their celebrity status. When Karen and Dennis teamed up, their combined radiance was almost intimidating. They synched in a classic Bogie/Bacall, Sinatra/Gardner kind of way. They consumed all that life had to offer, played and partied for all they were worth, and managed to look good doing it. They married twice, fell in and out of love over and over again, and when they finally parted, they both suffered the effects. Their flame had burned hot and bright, and when it was extinguished, each was left a little older, a little weaker, a little sadder.

In 1976, the Boys would find themselves having to endure a great deal of public scrutiny. For better or worse, many questions were posed and answered about the group, and plenty of blemishes and old wounds became obvious to anyone who cared to look. Before the year was over, Brian would become a regular touring member of the band, the Beach Boys would have a hit record, and they would make

a successful television special. They would remain a top concert draw. Still, 1976 was the year that it all fell apart again in many ways. Inner-band conflicts were proliferating, the critics would soon go on the attack, some band members were struggling with substance-abuse problems (which would only get worse), and several marriages were in trouble.

Out came the dirty laundry: the world learned that Dennis and Mike hated each other and that Mike resented Brian. Everyone would soon know that Carl and Dennis were embarrassed by Brian's new recordings and that Brian himself needed around-the-clock psychiatric care. Teams of lawyers were engaged to sort out the band's management issues, and personal assistants were hired to keep band members from each other's throats. Everyone was claiming they weren't getting their fair share, no one was to be trusted, and soon the band split into immovable factions. But the Beach Boys of 1976 were still a band, a family, and a business. Band members disagree about their musical direction, families fight over personal concerns, and business partners have legal conflicts. It just happened that the Beach Boys were experiencing strife simultaneously on all fronts, each skirmish fueling the next.

Brian's long-suffering wife, Marilyn, had finally had enough. She could no longer stand to watch her husband hide from life in his bedroom. Her first attempt to change things came when she assigned Mike Love's youngest brother, Stanley, the task of motivating the nearly broken behemoth to embrace life again. Stanley Love was a professional basketball player, and he truly cared about Brian, but his first run at the problem was unsuccessful. Marilyn then hired controversial therapist Dr. Eugene Landy to get Brian moving. After months of implementing some highly unusual techniques and taking an approach that bordered on mind control, Landy had Brian up and doing things, but his dominance of Brian was so thorough that he alienated the other band members, thereby giving rise to a whole new problem. Though Brian's drug abuse appeared under control, and though he was starting to lose weight, many believed that the Brian Wilson whom Landy was revitalizing bore little relation to the real Brian Wilson. The new therapy program was becoming a monster in its own right, and the extended Beach Boys family was convinced that Landy was too intrusive and too expensive.

Adding to the pressure was the fact that Brian was attempting to produce the new Beach Boys album. Dennis had suggested that it be called *Group Therapy*, but the more mundane title *15 Big Ones* was finally settled upon. Initially, Brian had liked the idea of putting out a kind of warm-up LP of his favorite oldies before embarking on an album of new material, but when it became apparent that neither album would ever be completed as conceived by the frail Brian, the two ideas were combined into one LP. "Brian really didn't want to be there," says recording engineer Earle Mankey. "Everyone would frantically run around getting all the musicians together, saying 'Brian's coming in.' Then he wouldn't show or he'd be there for ten minutes." While Dennis and Carl had always been extremely supportive of their big brother, they were now extremely unhappy with the results of these sessions. Dennis did not want the record released and called it an embarrassment. Mike Love and Warner/Reprise refused to hold it back any longer. The market was primed for Beach Boys product, and *15 Big Ones* would be issued — like it or not.

In early summer of 1976, *15 Big Ones*, the first LP of new Beach Boys material in almost four years, was sent out into the world. Carl (quoted by Timothy White) lamented its release, saying that he and Dennis were "heartbroken." "People have waited all this time, anticipating a new album, I hated to give them this." The shaky collection was slaughtered by the critics, but it did spawn a hit single — Brian's quirky arrangement of Chuck Berry's "Rock and Roll Music." The song climbed all the way to number five on the *Billboard* charts and became the Beach Boys' biggest hit since "Good Vibrations." Another single released from the album, "It's OK," boasted a classic Beach Boys groove and some decent harmony singing. Dennis added a nice bass vocal, and his "find a ride" tag brought the song to a catchy conclusion. But *15 Big Ones* was marred by some bad singing by Brian, equally bad singing by Dennis (on "In the Still of the Night"), and some of Mike Love's most offensively nasal vocals.

The fans were disturbed. Here were their Beach Boys, the greatest vocal group of the rock era, releasing a collection of tunes undermined by ragged vocals. Where were those trademark sparkling harmonies? One explanation was that Brian had ruined his once-incredible voice with years of chain-smoking and self-abuse. To add insult to injury, the production and arrangements were inconsistent,

Brian was back, but in awful shape (1976)

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amateurish — just plain bad. In the short term, the Beach Boys were lucky: *15 Big Ones* reached a lofty number eight on the LP charts in the late summer and then went gold. The fans were cutting them some slack based on their earlier achievements. But the long-term effects of *15 Big Ones* were devastating. The Beach Boys had lost the respect of a certain segment of the record-buying public, and they would never win it back. It had happened before, with *Smile*: the band's quality-conscious followers were set up to expect something special and had ended up getting the shaft.

Manager Stephen Love had contributed to this fall from grace by mounting a press blitz to support the "Brian's back" campaign. He'd figured that everyone longed to return to 1964, and Beach Boys personas were fabricated to fit the bill. Every article described Brian as the controlling genius, Carl as the gentle sidekick, Mike as the extroverted frontman, Al as . . . Al, and Dennis as the surfer-boy sex symbol. While these characterizations may have been accurate to

some minor degree, the Boys — Dennis and Carl in particular — had long outgrown them.

At that point, both brothers were equal to, or better than, Brian in terms of their ability to produce high-quality recordings. Of course, Brian was out of practice, and it's foolish to underestimate the innate and enduring talent of one of pop's greatest craftsmen. He just wasn't up to it in the summer of 1976. "It was a great mistake to put Brian in full control," Carl pointed out (quoted by Timothy White). "He was always the absolute producer, but little did he know that in his absence people grew up. We became as sensitive as the next guy. Why should I relinquish my rights as an artist? The whole process was a little bruising."

Word got out that Dennis had renewed his determination to release a solo album. He'd been working away while everyone else was focusing on Brian. His working title for the new record was *Freckles*. "I've been planning this solo thing for four or five years," Dennis told Timothy White of *Crawdaddy* in early 1976. "I was writing and completing songs, taking my time and never really feeling I would do an album because no one was behind it." He continued, "It was James Guercio who convinced me. I called him up one day and said, 'Look, I wanna make an album with you,' because I really loved some of his ideas. But after he heard the tracks I had so far he said, 'You do it and I'll get behind you and support you all the way.' I said "Uhhaahaayaayaa, shit! That's scary!' But I finally said okay. I've been in the studio from 10 AM until late evening every free day I've had."

Certain members of the Beach Boys camp were a little miffed that Dennis was out for himself again. He'd also distinguished himself as a separate entity that year when his song "Cuddle Up" was included on the megahit LP *Love Will Keep Us Together*, by former Beach Boys employees Daryl Dragon and Toni Tennille — better known, of course, as the Captain and Tennille.

In August, NBC aired a wonderful TV special called *The Beach Boys: It's OK*. It included footage of Brian's return to the stage, performing with the band in Anaheim on July 3, 1976. He had actually made his "comeback" the day before at the Oakland Coliseum, and I happened to be there. On that beautiful summer evening, the Boys came out looking like gods against a shimmering sailboat backdrop and the darkening sky. Mike Love, at his glittery best, treated the audience to

his Mick Jagger strut routine. He had become a master showman. Carl and Al, with full beards and long hair, came across with divine harmonies. Dennis anchored the proceedings, banging his clear Gretsch drums, pumping the audience with his tremendous physical power.

After a couple of tunes, a bemused-looking Brian, clad in white, strode to the grand piano at stage right. Not many audience members immediately grasped the significance of what they were seeing. One of the greatest acts in the history of pop music, still somehow clinging to its exalted position after years of tumult and conflict, was finally whole again. Brian had come out of his long hibernation. He quietly slid behind the huge piano and began to play along with the band. After a moment, there were some audible gasps from the crowd. "Is that Brian?" my friend Matt asked me. I couldn't speak. I was afraid I might cry. Even Mike and Dennis seemed surprised. Dennis kept his eyes on Brian as if he were willing his brother to be OK. When the song they were performing ended, Mike briefly introduced "Brian Wilson, the guy who wrote all this music." The buzz in the crowd grew.

From that point on, we were soaring. The band took us to the heights and kept us there for hours. It was one of the most magical performances I have ever witnessed, and I will never forget it. As the sold-out stadium audience danced to hit after hit, as the perfect summer evening wore on, I realized that Brian hadn't actually sung and that his piano playing was an afterthought to the band's sound. But what mattered was that he was *there*. And we were celebrating.

Karen Lamm often joined the Beach Boys onstage during their late-seventies concerts, providing an undeniable infusion of glamour. She energetically helped out on background vocals, sometimes playing the keyboard, and gave the boys in the audience something to hoot about. Mike, possibly out of jealousy, was not particularly happy to have her aboard, which only motivated Dennis to flaunt her even more. During one tour performance, Dennis leaped over his drums in mid-song, grabbed an astonished Karen, and began waltzing her about the stage. "Everything seemed to fade to black," Karen recalls. "Knowing fifty thousand eyes are only on you is an amazing rush. To celebrate the feeling of being in love with all of them watching was like a dream."

The dream continued in San Francisco, where Dennis and Karen went to the ballet. Renowned choreographer Twyla Tharp, who had already concentrated her talents on the Beach Boys' music with "Deuce Coupe," had now extended her exploration to fashion a new dance performance titled "Deuce Coupe II." As he watched, Dennis was gradually moved to tears. Before his eyes, graceful professional dancers spun and swayed to sounds that he'd helped to create. He grasped Karen's hand in the darkness, but the most intense moment was still ahead. From the silence came a single voice: "If every word I said could make you laugh. . . ." It was his own. To hear his own composition — "Forever" — coming back at him in such a context was an unprecedented thrill. Karen calls it "Dennis's proudest moment."

The NBC special, as well, turned out to be a remarkable achievement, winning critical acclaim. The original concept was suggested by Dennis — his drive to take on new challenges never seemed to flag. Sponsored by Dr. Pepper, *It's OK* was produced by Lorne Michaels of *Saturday Night Live* fame, and it featured some of the players who had generated so much comic energy during that show's heyday. Some of the special's segments are now considered classic. In one, John Belushi and Dan Akroyd, dressed as California highway patrolmen, show up at Brian's house and force him to get out of bed. They then charge him with "failure to surf" and cart him off to the nearest beach in their patrol car, surfboard strapped to the roof. As Akroyd directs the waves like a traffic cop, Belushi accompanies the bathrobe-clad Brian into the surf, and then Brian makes a pathetic attempt to catch a wave.

Another great segment of the NBC special depicts a casual gathering held in honor of Brian's birthday. The guests include all of the Beach Boys and their families, Audree Wilson and Karen Lamm among them. Also attending are — of all people — Paul and Linda McCartney, who seem quite comfortable mingling with the California Wilsons. Looking beyond the staged-for-TV surface of this clip, we glimpse a family during one of its happier times — poignant in retrospect.

During a segment filmed at Brother Studio, Brian, Dennis, and Carl sing the goofy "I'm Bugged at My Old Man." Brian pounds away at the piano, his two brothers work up some less than sparkling harmonies, and again the viewer gets a flash of the way things were:

here, after all has been said and done, are three kids just having fun. At one point, Dennis speaks about his father and the band's decision to fire him. There is sadness in his eyes and voice.

The concert segments of *It's OK* are spectacular. Michaels did a masterful job of showing just how these rock-and-roll icons managed to seduce and enthrall their American audiences in the live setting. Perhaps the most emotional segment of the entire special comes when Dennis sings "You Are So Beautiful" to the sixty thousand fans who jammed themselves into Anaheim Stadium that July. His delivery is humble and sincere, and when he pauses at the end to add, "You are so beautiful . . . California . . . to me," a wave of sighs rolls through the crowd.

Dennis had begun a tradition of serenading the fans in 1975, at the beginning of the band's encores, and "You Are So Beautiful" was always his song of choice. Joe Cocker had scored a major hit in early 1975 with his version of the bluesy ballad — it had climbed all the way to number five on the national charts. While Billy Preston had been credited with writing the song, and while Cocker had enshrined it in the pop-music canon, Dennis had somehow made it his own. Conducting interviews for this book, I discovered an amazing and little-known fact that could account for Dennis's proprietarial affection for the tune: Dennis not only put his stamp on "You Are So Beautiful" by singing it to thousands upon thousands of people, but he also cowrote it.

The story goes back to 1974. One night, Dennis and Billy Preston were partying and playing piano together. Also in attendance were Danny Hutton of Three Dog Night, Gerry Beckley of America, and Billy Hinsche. Preston — an accomplished artist in his own right, but perhaps best known for his work with the Beatles and the Rolling Stones — had already nailed down the opening chords and the 'You are so beautiful' line when Dennis began to sing along with him. "Dennis and Billy [Preston] really connected that night," says Hinsche. The others were singing over their shoulders. Something magical was occurring. Before the night was over, the song was finished, and though Dennis never received his share of the writing credit, he always knew the song was part of him. "I was there that night," Hinsche insists, "and I would not dispute that Dennis had a hand in writing 'You Are So Beautiful,' and that's the reason we

would do it in concert." Later on, Hinsche says, Dennis mentioned to some friends that he had cowritten the song, "and no one really believed him." One person who did believe, however, was Tom Murphy, the engineer for many of Dennis's unreleased solo recordings. "He would never lie about something like that," claims Murphy, eager to set the record straight for Dennis's sake. Now when people ask, "Why did Dennis insist on singing that song even after he had lost his voice?" the answer is not so elusive. Hinsche puts it this way: "Dennis loved people, he loved performing, and 'You Are So Beautiful' was his expression of it in song."

Media coverage of the Beach Boys was at an all-time peak in 1976. They graced the covers of *Rolling Stone* and *People*. *Newsweek* and *Crawdaddy* published feature articles on them. Interviews with the Boys cropped up everywhere — in print and on TV and on radio. Brian, encouraged by Dr. Landy, appeared solo on both *Saturday Night Live* and *The Mike Douglas Show*, looking as though he wanted to crawl back into bed and pull the covers over his head.

After some of this "Brian's back" nonsense began to die down, it was time to commence work on the next album. Mike Love went away to study with his beloved Maharishi for several months, and Al Jardine retreated to his Big Sur ranch to spend time with his family, leaving the three Wilson brothers to do the lion's share of the recording. Although Dennis and Carl were both keen to develop their own material, it was decided that this LP would be composed of one-hundred-percent Brian Wilson originals. Brian settled on a comfortable work schedule and seemed happy to be getting back in the saddle again.

Gaining strength through music, Brian also appeared with the band on its 1976–77 winter tour. Draped in a flowing black robe, looking significantly thinner, he played bass and contributed vocals. Out from beneath the heavy hand of Dr. Landy, he was coping with his own life, and it wasn't long before he and his family decided to fire the controversial therapist. As 1977 approached, the Beach Boys were looking for a new record deal. In light of all the hoopla of the previous year, several labels now considered them a desirable act to sign, and the bidding began.

When Brian, Dennis, and Carl appeared on the Grammy Awards telecast that winter, the music industry welcomed them with a warm

ovation. Dressed in tuxedos, the three Wilsons had never looked better. On this memorable night, Brian actually seemed to be having fun while presenting the New Artist award to the Starland Vocal Band. Dennis was accompanied to the Grammies by the ravishing Karen, who was swathed in a sheer evening gown. They were mobbed by the paparazzi. The gleaming couple seemed to have the world on a string.

Released in the spring of 1977, the new record — *The Beach Boys Love You* — was yet another unsettling peek inside the mind of Brian Wilson. With its distinctive synthesizer-dominated sound, the record flabbergasted some and confused still more. No one really knew what to make of this curious collection of Brian's disturbed, childlike expressions. It was kind of embarrassing. It revealed more than the listener really wanted to know. Songs like "Roller Skating Child" and "I Wanna Pick You Up" ("Cause You're Still a Baby to Me") had an unsettling, pedophilic overtone. As for the aural landscape of the album, it was shot through with a harsh buzzing sound. Many were put off by the lack of typical Beach Boys spaciousness in the mixes.

But obscured behind this wall of fan-repelling qualities was a very honest and original piece of work. Brian had tried to be commercial with *15 Big Ones*, and he'd both succeeded and failed: that album had been a commercial hit but a critical disaster. With *Love You*, he was striving to be the Brian Wilson he now was, and all he needed was some help from his brothers. Mike and Al were out of the way, so it was just himself, Dennis, and Carl playing most of the instruments and providing most of the vocals. *Love You* is pretty much a Wilson brothers album. It contains some worthy cuts, like "The Night Was So Young," which is a direct descendent of *Pet Sounds* in both sound and attitude. On lead vocals, Carl conveys a mood of loneliness; Brian's terse lyrics are heart wrenching. On the fascinatingly lame "Solar System," a certain playfulness breaks through — here, Brian ruminates on astrology, astronomy, as well as love, and the shallowness of it all is strangely refreshing. The album rocks out with "Let Us Go On This Way" and "Honkin' down the Highway," on which Dennis's drumming can only be described as a two-fisted slam. We are also treated to a couple of rare Brian-Dennis vocal duets, on "I Wanna Pick You Up" and "I'll Bet He's Nice"; Carl joins them for the bridge solo on the latter. The brotherly interaction is energizing

— it's clear that Dennis and Carl willingly checked their egos to help Brian get this one out. Of course, the record was a commercial flop, as are most artistically challenging offerings, but *Love You* was a brave effort, and it should be valued as such. There is nothing quite like it, and, as engineer Earle Mankey (who recorded most of the album) states, "*Love You* is frighteningly revealing, because it is Brian straight and raw."

While *The Beach Boys Love You* was confusing listeners everywhere, CBS Records announced that it had signed the group to a lucrative new contract. Somehow, the aging Boys had secured an impressive signing bonus and would be receiving first-class treatment from a major recording company. With label executive James William Guercio in their corner, the Beach Boys had access at the highest level. It was a particularly sweet deal.

The group introduced itself officially to its new employer at a huge CBS convention that was held in London that summer. There they performed a well-received set, which included the a cappella "Their Hearts Were Full of Spring." The song allowed Brian the chance to demonstrate how much his vocal skills had improved. The future was looking rosy for these embattled veteran rockers, at least on a career level — on a more personal level, however, their real-life soap-opera existence was veering out of control.

Even as they sang of good vibrations, drawing 150,000 jubilant fans to a late-summer concert in New York's Central Park, things were beginning to melt down. By the fall, manager Stephen Love had been fired and rehired, the band had broken up and reformed, and Brian had resumed his self-destructive habits. Mike and Al were at war with Carl and Dennis, and Brian was often tugged in both directions. The Beach Boys' power struggle was delineated once and for all. From that point on, Mike, Stephen, and Al were a solid voting block. As such, they would forever overrule Carl and Dennis. Practically every decision, artistic or otherwise, would be dictated by the Love contingent. Brian, unable to cope, gave his vote to either Marilyn or Mike and declined to participate at all. All this drove Dennis and Carl crazy. Finally, Dennis resolved to fight back with his ultimate weapon: his music.

Through Dennis's good friend James Guercio, CBS Records had been courting Dennis Wilson as a solo artist, and even before the

Beach Boys had signed with the label an independent agreement had been reached with Dennis. Not much had been made of it in the press, but the fact is that Dennis had strengthened the band's position greatly by previewing his solo recordings to the company's A&R department earlier in the year. A promotional film created by Ed Roach was screened for CBS executives and retailers to generate further momentum. It showed Dennis working in the studio on a beautiful tune titled "The River Song." When Mike and the others found out that Dennis had received a six-figure advance upon signing his own contract with the CBS custom Caribou label, they reacted in a typically jealous manner. Apparently, Mike had been hoping for a CBS solo deal of his own, but no one was interested. It must have killed him to learn that Guercio and CBS were encouraging Dennis to keep working on his own material until he had enough for three albums. "[The record company] call[s] it one, two, three. I just don't stop recording," said Dennis in a 1977 interview with David Leaf.

Nothing was more appealing to Dennis at this point than the prospect of working on his own music. In another interview the same year, he explained, "Music is one of the mediums in the world where you can absolutely involve yourself, emotionally, spiritually, and physically. So what I do is get involved." Karen Lamm, who regularly collaborated with Dennis and inspired many of his best songs, recalls how joyful her husband would become when he was set loose in the studio: "Any sound he wanted on his records he could play. Whether it was an oboe or a harp or whatever. Dennis would experiment with it and give it a little time, and before long he would just soar musically."

Dennis's versatility became a huge asset in the recording process, and he was proud of it. "On some of the tracks I play everything myself," he declared. John Hanlon, who worked closely with Dennis throughout this period, explains, "He just had all this creativity in him. He had more of Brian in him than anyone. To my ear, Dennis was another Brian Wilson." Engineer Earle Mankey reveals that "Dennis would roller skate to the studio in the morning and be there before everyone. The best I could do was be there by 10 AM, but Dennis would already be there. He was a really hard worker." All that hard work paid off in the fall of 1977. After many false starts, after all the frustration, after being ignored and misused by some of

9-year-old Carnie Wilson [right] showing Uncle Dennis's new record

KEITH REEVES ARCHIVE

his bandmates, after years of being labeled the least-talented Wilson brother, Dennis was about to break free.

When it was released, on September 16, 1977, *Pacific Ocean Blue* sent a shock wave through the Beach Boys hierarchy. Dennis's solo album was clearly superior to any Beach Boys release dating back to the early seventies. It was brilliant, and a number of people were convinced that it proved Dennis would never need the Beach Boys again. The bold cover photo, taken by Karen, is a near-life-sized closeup of Dennis's unsmiling face. He looks like a lion king, complete with flowing mane and an intense stare that signals a timeless strength. The photo also communicates a pugnacious attitude: here is an underdog about to deliver a knockout punch. The photos inside the gatefold cover show Dennis doing the things he loved to do most: recording his music, playing his drums, sailing *The Harmony*, and communing with the Pacific Ocean. These photographs serve as a poignant visual companion to a compelling musical representation of Dennis Wilson, the man, in all his complexity.

The album opens with the majestic "River Song," an ambitious tune that Dennis wrote in the early seventies following that river

encounter he'd had on the camping trip to Honeymoon Creek. The basic recorded track of this song had been around for many years, and it featured a rock-solid drum performance by Ricky Fataar. Dennis had been fine-tuning it for so long that it had taken on epic dimensions; overdub after overdub was added then stripped then layered on again until it was right. The result is astonishing. Dennis, supported by Carl, leads us into the maze with a familiar harmony appetizer, then he takes over in a Ray Charles/Joe Cocker style and burns up the grooves. A full-choir backing ranges from lilting whisper to gospel wailing. Driving, distorted guitar and Dennis's tinkling piano send the number to its riveting climax. The lyrics, some of which were written by Carl, describe Dennis's disgust with city life and how the mighty river represents the freedom he longs for. My sense is that if this song had been released to fill the Beach Boys' material void of early 1976 with a produced-by-Brian Wilson credit attached to it, it would have been hailed as one of the Beach Boys' greatest works. As the lead track on the Dennis Wilson solo album, it made waves, but only among those who were truly willing to listen.

The album also contains the wobbly rocker "What's Wrong?" The song has a nice honky-tonk groove, bolstered by Dennis's fine piano and a woozy saxophone riff — it evokes its composer in hard-drinking mode. Though "What's Wrong?" is probably the only weak moment on *Pacific Ocean Blue*, it still received a fair amount of FM radio exposure that fall, because its booze-soaked aura and inebriated charm appealed to a certain type of listener. One version of the song, featuring an insistent harmonica that drives the mix and vocals reminiscent of those on Elvis Presley's Sun recordings, was passed over for inclusion on *Pacific Ocean Blue* in favor of this inferior one — an unfortunate choice that diminished the luster of the collection.

Next on side one is the magical "Moonshine," a good demonstration of what the Beach Boys of 1977 should have sounded like. Opening with Dennis's hazy vocals and piano, it bursts forth into a flood of layered synth euphoria. The solid backbeat is provided by Bobby Figueroa, ponderously drilling the pocket with an echo-laden snare. On this cut, all the other instruments are played by Dennis. The lyrics spin a tale of love, vulnerability, sorrow, and loss. The vocals are fabulous, replete with Mike Love-esque bass singing and a barely audible falsetto that is pure Brian. Dennis takes these signature

elements, re-creates them to fit a modern structure, and fashions an audio rainbow — classic Beach Boys, yet so abstract. The effect is breathtaking.

Following one of the most beautiful fades ever recorded are a few seconds of silence, and then comes power-chord guitar: Dennis rocks us with "Friday Night." The song is simple in structure, and it gives loads of space to drums and guitar. Again, all of the instruments are played by Dennis except guitar. The beat is slow, slamming; it pumps like a machine, and Dennis, shouting, his voice raspy, proclaims himself a "white punk," "a motorcycle rider," and a host of other macho archetypes. Then, a hugely revealing shift: he is suddenly speaking about Jesus, about his soul, about how all this relates to his beloved rock and roll. Finally, a moaning slide guitar draws the song into a fade-out as Dennis pleads with it to play on.

After the edgy "Friday Night," a massive, breathy bass harmonica — played by Dennis — catches us completely off guard and leads us into the playful funk of "Dreamer." Apparently, in order to get the sound he wanted out of his harmonica, Dennis stretched himself out on his back on the studio floor, uncharacteristically remarking that "this is the way Charlie used to play it." Cowritten with Gregg Jakobson, as were the previous three songs, "Dreamer" is a peculiar offering with a satirical twist. Its groove is dominated by Dennis's jazzy electric-piano chording and a great drum performance by Bobby Figueroa. According to Earle Mankey, "Dennis usually tried to get Hal Blaine" for most of the drum tracks on these sessions, but he would play himself when Blaine was unavailable. On this track, he wisely chose instead to use the intense Figueroa, whose hot, syncopated style infuses the song with personality. "Dreamer" sails along smoothly, then flies into a cacophonous Dixieland craziness before settling into its original groove. Midway through, calm reigns with Dennis's lovely invocation, "Let the wind carry your blues away" — a message he often tried to pass on to those he met. There is a *Born to Run*-era Springsteen feel here, as well as a lilting, Spectorish accent. Once more, we launch back into a funky, bass-harmonica-driven progression, this time with an overdriven guitar solo by John Hanlon. The whole thing wraps up with a wild Dixieland fade-out jam. "Dreamer" is an amazing audio smorgasbord, and Denny is just getting warmed up.

The final song on side one must be ranked among the greatest tracks Dennis ever gave us. "Thoughts of You" begins with his weariest of vocal styles, conveying a longing that seems so authentic that it's hard to interpret it as mere performance. He begs forgiveness, tells his muse (Karen Lamm) he misses her, and then spirals into darkness and despair. The song's next passage is otherworldly; the demonesque power that drives it is as tangible as that of the *Smile* tapes. A whirling funnel of voices and strings gathers chaotic strength, and we can barely decipher Dennis's unnerving chant, "All things that live one day must die, you know." He continues, "Even love, and the things we hold close." Reaching a climax, Dennis screams, horrified, "Look what we've done!" Then there is an uneasy shuffling and a soft exhalation. We have traveled to the depths of despair and back with Dennis as he sits at his piano. "Loneliness is a very special place," he intones, and we sense that this is the insight of a burnt-out and guilt-ridden man. "Thoughts of You" moves the listener time and again with the sheer force of its honesty. The artist who lays it all out like this puts himself at emotional risk, and such artistic risk-taking is therefore rare. When I spoke with Earle Mankey about his work on the *Pacific Ocean Blue* sessions, he said, "The one thing Dennis would say every day for a year was that he wanted the truth. We would all look at each other and say, 'Well, what *is* the truth?' But that's what he wanted — the truth."

Side two begins with a melancholy Dennis, again at his piano, singing gently about coming home "to where she waits." The track is called "Time," and it is a vivid snapshot of a man who has cheated and is shackled by his own guilt. "Time" has a bleakly romantic air, accented by a foggy trumpet solo in shades of blue. Dennis jolts us out of this mood with another of his dramatic shifts in aural dynamics. A quick shake of the maracas and "boom!" — we blast out of that blue fog into a cold realm where an industrial beat holds sway. Harsh synth guitar and phased voice are prodded by an aggressive echoed snare drum. This time, the drumming has Dennis written all over it — it's pure power and attitude.

As "Time" fades out, cold and edgy, we are eased into the whimsically beautiful "You and I." This is the lightest track on a very heavy album, and it bounces along, giddy and sweet. Dennis, charming and self-deprecating, woos his lover and offers the sweetest of hooks —

"no more lonely nights." The production features Dennis's warm electric piano and Ed Carter's supple guitar picking. The versatile Carter is all over this album, and when I asked him how Dennis motivated the musicians during the sessions, he laughed, "Dennis would dance around and do body language to express what he wanted."

"You and I" was the song everyone picked as the one that would break the album into the AOR market. A promotional single was prepared and shipped to key stations. For a couple of weeks, it was added as a featured pick to playlists across the US, and it looked like it could be a hit. But, although the tune was light and catchy — it had an undeniable commercial edge — its success as a single was minimal. In the end, however, top-forty success was the last thing Dennis cared about. Comments songwriter Steve Kalinich, "Dennis never talked about, 'Is this commercial? Will it sell?' It was always for pure art form." Trisha Roach Campo explains, "What the record company wanted was something they could put on the radio and make the bucks and Dennis really didn't give that to them."

The title track, "Pacific Ocean Blues," is a hard rocker that showcases some interesting liquid sound effects. Dennis referred to it as "my least favorite cut" on the album. He felt that it wasn't properly developed and came off sounding incomplete. It's actually a fun, energetic workout, although the lyrics are a little hokey. Those lyrics, which build on an environmental theme, were written by none other than Mike Love. Despite the at times intense animosity that existed between Mike and Dennis, the two shared a history, and their feelings for one another were complex, ambivalent. Dennis was high on *Pacific Ocean Blue*, and he wanted to push the jealousy aside; he wanted everyone to participate in the creative process he'd initiated, so, as a gesture of goodwill, he approached Mike. A review of the album appearing in a national publication declared that "Dennis's record is so good that it even survives the participation of the dreaded Mike Love."

By this point in the album, the listener has been put through an emotional ringer and has experienced a diverse array of sounds and musical styles. Three songs remain, and these form a balanced trilogy that constitutes the strongest section of the LP. The first is "Farewell My Friend," and it's about the passing of Otto "Pops" Hinsche. Pops

was Carl's father-in-law and the father of Billy Hinsche. Dennis was crushed by his death. He'd told friends that Pops had once saved his life, and he now maintained that Pops had died in his arms. "Farewell My Friend" flows gently, is infused with grief, and is performed in a lovely Hawaiian style complete with steel guitar, marimba, and soft aloha vocals — courtesy of Carl. "Dennis was a very sensitive person, and he could cry very easily when something touched him," says Billy Hinsche, who is very proud of the song that Dennis wrote as a tribute to his father. "Farewell My Friend" is a superbly simple leave-taking that others have since used to express their own bereavement.

"Rainbows" is an exuberant mood shift. It captures the spirit of the younger Dennis — the boy who ran towards adventure with open arms and experienced moments of absolute happiness. Dennis cowrote "Rainbows" with Carl and Stephen Kalinich (a favorite collaborator and friend of Dennis's since the mid-sixties), and the track has a rollicking momentum propelled by confident drums, dancing mandolin, and richly layered vocal harmonies.

The final track on the album is "The End of the Show," a song that encapsulates Dennis's feelings about his fans. He expresses gratitude for the life they have given him; he tells them how wonderful it is to be alive; he offers thanks. As the song builds to its moving climax, Dennis invokes the classic Beach Boys style, and the harmonies soar. Carl is easily distinguished on the vocal track, and Bruce Johnston delivers a sweet, rich falsetto. Dennis's obvious skill in re-creating and orchestrating the elements of the sound the Beach Boys had lost years before prompts questions about why he was routinely denied more control in the studio.

The fact that there are traces of the Beach Boys throughout *Pacific Ocean Blue* conveys the impression that Dennis fashioned this exemplary piece of work with a great deal of help from his brothers. Not true. For the most part, he was left alone to sink or swim. His CBS contract did not allow the other Beach Boys to perform on his recordings, and though his brothers were willing to bend that rule they were vigorously discouraged from doing so by the label and by other members of the Beach Boys organization. "They practically had to smuggle Brian into Dennis's sessions," says Trisha Roach Campo, who was managing Brother Studio. "It happened on occasion, but it happened kind of secretly." Brian's brief appearances were more

inspirational than practical. Carl, however, did find a way to lend Dennis some solid support. Late one night, as Dennis labored on alone, Carl showed up unannounced — no small feat, as he'd been confined to a wheelchair due to a serious bout of back trouble. A delighted Dennis immediately set a microphone in front of him. "I looked at Carl, and he was so white and in so much pain," recalls Trisha Roach Campo. "But he sang with such passion and was so damn happy to be there for Dennis."

Upon the release of *Pacific Ocean Blue*, a promotional gathering was held at Tower Records on Sunset Boulevard in the heart of Hollywood, a traditional release-party venue for the recording industry. Although at one point in the early seventies he'd been banned from Tower Sunset due to some peculiar antics he'd engaged in on the premises, Brian would hold the party for his 1998 release, *Imagination*, at the same historic location. But on this day, twenty years earlier, it was Dennis's turn. He'd trimmed his long hair and shaved off his beard for the event, and he looked more cleancut than he had in a long time. Dennis was the star of the moment, beaming from ear to ear, holding his lovely Karen, and enlivening the gathering of industry types and the people who'd helped him realize his dream of making a solo album with his warmth and humor. No one knew that this would be the crowning moment of his career. At this moment, no one was talking about the Beach Boys. No one was talking about Brian. No one was there for any other reason than to wish Dennis well. It was time to celebrate the fact that Dennis had done what no other Beach Boy had managed to do: he had broken free and expressed himself on his own terms. The celebration was glorious, but it seemed to be over in a heartbeat.

Large print ads for *Pacific Ocean Blue* began to appear, and CBS/Caribou's first-rate promotional campaign for the album got underway. Dennis gave interviews to various music magazines. On the copies of the LP that were sent out to media contacts, he jotted personal messages along the lines of: "Hi Jon — this is my new record. I'm a little nervous about it because it's my first one. Tell me what you think of it. Thanks, Dennis." The humility was genuine. He was always eager for feedback on his work and would pay close attention to it when it was given.

When I spoke to Dennis one day in 1978, we discussed the produc-

tion techniques he'd employed for *Pacific Ocean Blue*. "The first album is lightweight," Dennis told me. "The next one will kick ass." He was anxious to know what I thought, and I responded by telling him that I considered *Pacific Ocean Blue* to be one of the most beautifully crafted albums I'd ever heard. The corners of his mouth turned up, and a little boy's grin brightened his weathered face for just a second, then it was back to thoughts of what lay ahead. Dennis didn't much like to look back. To him, art was something that could only move forward. That's why being in a band that was trading on its past had become such a burden to him. He was in a perpetual state of turmoil: he loved the Beach Boys, but hated what they had become. His relationship with his bandmates was increasingly strained.

As Dennis tried to focus on the release of the album he'd poured his heart and soul into, the Beach Boys were in danger of coming apart at the seams. Although the huge turnout for the summer 1977 Central Park concert had reaffirmed the band's immense popularity, an ugly incident that occurred during a September date on the same tour in Newark, New Jersey, brought the band abruptly back down to earth. The Beach Boys now traveled in two separate contingents: one was made up of Mike, Al, Mike's brother Stan, and Brian; the other included Dennis, Carl, and several members of the backing band. Of course, the ranks of each group were swelled by various personal assistants, legal representatives, bodyguards, and family members. The Love contingent was into meditating and clean living — its adherents frowned upon smoking and alcohol consumption. Dennis, Carl, and friends liked to party. Each group had its own aircraft. Tour manager Jerry Schilling explains, "It was so bad that we had to charter two planes, not because of numbers of people, but because of differing philosophies. Dennis would sometimes stray accidentally-on-purpose onto the Love/Jardine jet smoking a huge Cuban cigar, blowing thick clouds of smoke around the cabin. A member of the touring entourage recalls that Mike and Al would jump up yelling, "Hey! Hey! The smoking plane is over there." Dennis — feigning surprise and saying, "What? What?" — would be ushered off the aircraft while the offended parties angrily fanned away the fumes.

On September 3, 1977, Dennis and Carl's plane was sitting on the runway near the Love/Jardine jet when the inevitable occurred.

Dennis was convinced that Brian was being forced to travel with the Love contingent. He and Carl asked Brian to join them, Brian accepted, and the Love contingent objected. The boiling point had finally been reached, and the resulting struggle — "heated and very close to a fistfight," according to Schilling (who would survive all of this to become the group's manager, — spilled out onto the tarmac. The national rock press was covering the tour, and *Rolling Stone*'s John Swenson reported that the fracas was like a scene from *Casablanca*. Accusations were lobbed back and forth like hand grenades, Dennis and Stan Love nearly came to blows, and the media was soon announcing that the Beach Boys had broken up. Shortly after the incident, Dennis said to Karen, "Remember this day, September third. The Beach Boys broke up on Al Jardine's birthday."

Close, but not quite. The Boys managed to patch things up somewhat a couple of weeks later, the day after Dennis's record came out, during a meeting held at Brian's house. Still, the two factions could not come together over management, artistic direction, and practically every other facet of their professional arrangement. Dennis's disdain for manager Steve Love was particularly intense. "A basic personality conflict that will prevent us from ever getting along," was the way Dennis described the source of the trouble to reporter Dennis Hunt. When asked if a compromise with Steve Love was possible, he shot back, "Hell no! I don't want him managing my business. This group is not going to continue unless this problem is settled."

The standoff eventually degenerated into a total breakdown. "I have no communication with Mike and Steve Love," said Dennis. "I don't know what they're doing about settling this." Carl and Dennis stood firmly united, but they were outnumbered and outmaneuvered by the Love faction. The two Wilson brothers, unable to wrest control from Mike Love, would die knowing that the Beach Boys were less of a band than they could have been if the bitter conflict had been resolved.

The fall of 1977 was tainted by all this negativity. Still, Dennis had little choice but to put on a brave face and get busy promoting *Pacific Ocean Blue*. Critical reaction to the album was more positive than it had been to any Beach Boys product in years. Most reviewers were very impressed with Dennis's unusual creation. Rock's bible, *Rolling Stone*, declared it a small masterpiece and compared Dennis favorably

The Beach Boys were disagreeing about everything from lifestyle to artistic direction

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to John Lennon. Many were amazed at the quality of Dennis's rough and ravaged voice. One reviewer described his vocal style as "light appearing through the fog." The years of hard performing, drinking, drug-taking, and chain-smoking had done a number on his already raspy voice. Yet what was considered an asset in 1977 would later develop into a tragedy: in subsequent years, the light would no longer penetrate the fog; Dennis's vocal chords would deteriorate radically.

Dennis's voice was not the main critical focus, though. Instead, it was his tender, honest writing style that made them sit up and take notice. As word of the "other" Beach Boy's great new album spread, *Pacific Ocean Blue* began to sell quite briskly. It actually outsold some Beach Boys albums, including the two released within the same year. The record-buying public was signaling its interest, and as a result a Dennis Wilson solo tour entered the planning stages. *Pacific Ocean Blue* made its way onto the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart, and all Dennis could think of was how good the next album was going to be.

"It's so nerve-wracking to play an album you've just done for people," Dennis remarked to Carol Rose of *Rock*. "People tell me, 'Don't

worry, you're going to be a star,' but that's not the point. I just want to do it well enough so I can do it again." In retrospect, it's hard to imagine how he could have done it better. As one reviewer put it, "He's a fucking genius. No two songs on that album are alike. It's a mindblower." Typically, Dennis would counter this type of praise with modesty and a kind of innocent hopefulness: "I want to be remembered as warmth. I would just like to make people feel safe. The greatest success in life is to feel I'm something other than a walking, talking machine. I think my favorite feeling of all is feeling something for someone; the feeling of falling in love, the newness of love." When asked what advice he would give to aspiring artists, he responded, "Develop your heart."

As you listen to Dennis's music, it becomes apparent that he had an unusually well-developed heart — a unique trait in someone who'd spent so much of his life in the cold, cruel world of show business. Somehow, despite all of the ego inflating that success brings, the selfishness that material wealth brings, and the callousness that failure and frustration bring, Dennis survived with his heart intact. For example, he'd strive to find a way to help less fortunate people who crossed his path. When a total stranger once mentioned to him that he'd recently lost his job, Dennis gave the man and his family his own washer and dryer. Dennis's wife at that time, Carole, only learned about this spontaneous act of generosity when she went to wash some clothes, but she, too, appreciated Dennis's giving nature. "I remember one Christmas when he heard about a young crippled girl who lived in the San Bernardino Mountains who wasn't getting along too well," Carole told *Dennymania*. "Denny and Carl took a truckload of gifts to her." They brought her a new TV and a Christmas tree decorated with money. Explained Carole, "It made [Dennis] feel very special to help her and her family." He lent his support to the Special Olympics and visited the elderly in hospitals. He adored all children. Ask the people who knew him, and you'll hear the same thing, time and again: Dennis Wilson had a legendary heart.

But such big hearts are susceptible to breakage. Those who are hard of heart are sometimes described as strong or resilient; Dennis, while strong and resilient in many ways, was always vulnerable to emotional pain. He could be swept away by his powerful feelings. When he was young, he was often overwhelmed with the excitement

of discovering and participating in the world around him. As he grew older, he endured periods of great depression and loneliness, and when he became depressed he usually drank to excess. Alcohol would fortify him, cushion him from negative feelings, and turn him into a good-time Charlie — sloppy, gregarious, out of control. He'd begun drinking regularly at an early age, and as the years passed his tolerance to alcohol increased. So, of course, did his intake. Around the time he was working on his solo LP, he began to flirt with heroin. Since the sixties, Dennis had experimented with an array of drugs, but never heroin. As alcohol and heroin tightened their grip upon him, Dennis increased his cocaine intake, and of the three addictive substances this was the worst. What made his fondness for coke so dangerous was that it fueled his desire to drink even more. Dennis's emotional and physical health were now at grave risk.

That summer, Led Zeppelin performed at the Los Angeles Forum. It would turn out to be the band's final performance there. After the show, Dennis was seen cavorting backstage with Zeppelin's John Bonham and Keith Moon of the Who. This triumvirate of superstar rock drummers consumed a banquet of intoxicants and happily toasted the good life. All three would be dead before their fortieth birthdays.

Certain incidents began to occur that put Dennis in a very bad light as far as his fans and his bandmates were concerned. He was arrested after a concert in Tucson, Arizona, after being found in his hotel room with a girl of sixteen — exactly half his age. While this was hardly an unusual predicament for a rock musician to find himself entangled in, the press reports of the incident were embarrassing. What was Dennis Wilson doing sharing drugs and alcohol (and who knows what else) with an underage fan? Dennis maintained that it was all a setup, but he was investigated for contributing to the delinquency of a minor and eventually had to shell out one hundred thousand dollars in legal fees.

Drunk driving and disturbing the peace charges were also laid against him at one point that year, and he had his driver's license revoked a number of times. It was becoming routine for Dennis to show up drunk for the Beach Boys' concert appearances. One reviewer commented, "Dennis was looking sleepy and sluggish, talking much too loudly into the microphone. He initiated the encore

with a horribly raspy 'You Are So Beautiful' on which he knocked the microphone from its socket to the floor with a loud thud."

The Beach Boys' concerts began to lose their professional consistency. Since their resurgence at the beginning of the decade, the Beach Boys had maintained their edge as one of the most dynamic live acts in the business; now, they were often sloppy and under-rehearsed; Brian and Dennis were unpredictable at best. The chemistry among band members was going from bad to worse. Dennis expended much of his onstage energy devising new ways to annoy Mike and Al. "Mike would go on this big spiel about 'I'm going to be talking tomorrow at the meditation center,'" remembers Bobby Figueroa. "Dennis would just get fed up and he'd wait until Mike was done. Then he would walk up to the microphone and say, 'Now meditate, goddamn it!' Of course, we in the band would just be dying. We couldn't let anybody see it, but we were trying not to just fall on the ground laughing." A fuming Mike and a relentlessly teasing Dennis produced a current of tension that sometimes interfered with the music. Still, a Beach Boys concert ranked among the premier events of the summer in most American cities.

Until early 1977, Dennis had been living with Karen at the house on Broad Beach Road. When they separated, he moved to Venice. Hawaii became one of his favorite destinations during this period, but for the most part he kept his vagabond tendencies in check and stayed close to Brother Studio in Santa Monica, where he diligently labored on his new recordings. When Dennis was on a roll, it could last for several intense weeks at a time — breaks were few and far between. Engineer John Hanlon reminisces about one particular night at Brother when Dennis suddenly decided that some female company might break the monotony of the recording process. He said to John, "I bet you I can get some girls down here faster than you can." The dare escalated into a proper bet: Dennis offered Hanlon double his salary for the week against nothing. Hanlon took the bet with some trepidation, realizing that his challenger was one highly seasoned ladies' man. Hanlon had one chance of winning — he'd have to contact his friend Denise, a *Playboy* Playmate. His strategy worked, and in record time Denise, along with six or seven of her Playmate friends, showed up at the studio. Dennis's eyes nearly popped out of his head when a parade of curves and cleavage came

sauntering through the door saying, "Hi, John!" "Dennis was still busy dialing numbers out of his little black book," laughs Hanlon. "I'll never forget the look on his face."

Dennis genuinely admired John Hanlon's close-to-the-bone existence. He'd frequently longed for a simpler life himself. When he noticed Hanlon bringing a brown-bag lunch to work, he asked if John's girlfriend could make one for him, too. Perched happily on the back steps of the studio with Hanlon, eating a sandwich, Dennis would comment on how much better this was than heading off to some Beverly Hills eatery with Karen. This wealthy pop star, who drove a Rolls Corniche, actually insisted on eating many of his meals at a coffeeshop around the corner from the studio that was so grimy it repelled nearly everyone but the poor and homeless. A close friend of Dennis's described it as "so gross it was scary to go in." When people would question his unorthodox choice of restaurant, Dennis would only say, "I have to go there." His friend explains: "Dennis had a constant need to be with the underdogs of the world because he truly felt he was one of them."

Some days, after he'd eaten a twenty-five-cent bowl of soup among the derelicts and bag people, he would pilot his Rolls down to the marina and take out *The Harmony*. The days Dennis spent working on his beloved *Harmony* were probably the most peaceful of his later life. He found sanding, scrubbing, varnishing, and generally maintaining the huge old craft deeply satisfying. Cruising up and down the coast, he'd survey the beaches where he'd surfed and hung out with his pals throughout his youth. Then he'd drop anchor in one of a handful of favorite places and go scuba diving, often spearing a fish for supper. So that he'd always be ready when inspiration struck, he kept drums and electronic keyboards aboard *The Harmony*. Stories have circulated of Dennis dangling off the stern, tied to a rope, serenading schools of porpoises with his harmonica as the enthralled sea creatures trailed along in the vessel's gentle wake. There were sun-drenched trips to Hawaii, Mexico, Catalina, or any other place the wandering Beach Boy had an urge to see. The freedom he experienced during these excursions was like a tonic: he'd depart exhausted and defeated; by the time he returned *The Harmony* to home port, he'd be refreshed and ready to take on the world once again. *The Harmony* was a monumental luxury, but the good that it did Dennis

was well worth the price. Fred Vail once called *The Harmony* "the essence of Dennis." There seemed to be a symbolic connection between the aging dinosaur that was *The Harmony* and the living legend that was Dennis Wilson. As long as Dennis could keep his vessel afloat, he would remain afloat himself.

Pacific Ocean Blue ended up selling nearly a quarter of a million copies, which was considered excellent for a debut effort. Both CBS/Caribou and Dennis were delighted. The album may not have been a huge hit, but it had made a very respectable showing. Coupled with the critical praise the album received, the sales figures amounted to a green light for Dennis — he could now work on a new album for release in the coming year. All the while, he was dreaming of producing other artists, too. One, in particular, was Barbra Streisand. "I would love to work with Barbra," said Dennis. "I'm in love with her voice. Her voice is a miracle." He often spoke of the musical vision he had for Streisand. "I sure would like to talk with her," he'd say. "I think Barbra Streisand should get funky!"

But the reality was that Dennis had far too many Beach Boys commitments. There was simply no time to shoulder new professional responsibilities, no matter how badly he wanted to. It would be difficult enough to maintain a solo career amid the never-ending chaos of the band. Some of Dennis's friends believed that the time had arrived for him to cut himself free. "He wanted to break away from the Beach Boys identity," says Ed Carter. "With all the power and talent that an album [*Pacific Ocean Blue*] of that quality shows, all that painstaking effort is a big commitment, but for some reason, when it came right down to it, he stepped back."

During the late fall of 1977, dates were announced for a short Dennis Wilson solo tour. Venues such as LA's Dorothy Chandler Pavilion and other mid-sized concert halls were booked. "I'm starting my own concert career," Dennis explained to Dennis Hunt of the *Los Angeles Times*. "My first date is in November in New York. I'll be touring with a small orchestra. I'll be doing about ten cities." Then he added, "If I'm not with the group, I'll do more," hinting at the possibility of his leaving the Beach Boys. Press releases claimed that a twenty-two-piece orchestra would back Dennis and that Ricci Martin would be the opening act. It was also announced that Carl, Bruce, and Brian could be involved in some of the shows. Soon after these

announcements were made, predictable conflicts arose within the Beach Boys camp. Some members of the band were still upset at the prospect of Dennis striking out on his own. Then his label began to insist that Dennis's requirements were too expensive. A member of the Beach Boys touring band says, "He wanted a big setting, lots of horns, strings, and I think the record company wasn't willing to go that far in terms of expenditures." So Dennis canceled his dates, saying that band commitments had made it impossible for him to complete his plans. He promised he would reschedule in the coming months. By then, of course, it would be too late. Dennis's shot at a solo tour had vanished forever.

At about this time, it seemed as though Dennis might be persuaded to resuscitate his dormant acting career. His 1971 turn as the mechanic in *Two Lane Blacktop* had had little impact on the public, but he'd apparently impressed some industry heavyweights. According to Ed Roach, a film-industry veteran, Dennis was offered several scripts, but he turned them down. The boredom of hanging around on the set and the rigidity of shooting schedules were intolerable to the freewheeling Dennis. But, despite his utter lack of enthusiasm for acting, Dennis was considered by some to be matinee-idol material. "He had that aura about him that few do. He was a star," declares James Guercio, who has produced some very successful films.

One role that Dennis reportedly turned down was the lead in Alan Parker's *Midnight Express*. "They held up production on that movie for a month and a half because they really wanted Dennis to play the Billy Hayes part," says Roach. "He had that script for a long time, but he decided it wasn't right for him." The intense and violent story of a drug smuggler's experiences in a foreign jail was just too extreme, even for Dennis. "He felt that the drug connotation would stick with him if he took the part," explains Roach, while also pointing out the sad irony that Dennis will forever be associated with drug abuse anyway. *Midnight Express* went on to become one of the biggest films of 1978. Brad Davis starred as Hayes, and Oliver Stone won the Oscar for best screenplay.

Karen Lamm, who read for a part in *Midnight Express*, remembers things differently. "I was the one who had that script, and that's why Dennis was looking at it. Dennis was offered the lead in a different film, called *The Frat Rat*, which was written by James Hart. We were

both going to be in it with Jan Michael Vincent and Debra Raffin, but it fell apart." That college-fraternity-party concept eventually evolved into *Animal House*, the vehicle that launched John Belushi's short movie career. Karen describes how she brought Dennis to see legendary acting teacher Lee Strasberg, with whom she was studying. "I think he lasted for one class and that was it. Poor Dennis — every time I looked at him I started laughing. I just couldn't keep a straight face with him there." Strasberg attempted to include Dennis in a workup of *Barefoot in the Park*. "I walked up onstage and I forgot my words," Dennis said. "I embarrassed myself so I didn't go back." Dennis never regretted his decision to forgo acting. His life was full with his music.

One of the many commitments Dennis had to struggle with was the new Beach Boys album. The project was intended to fulfill the band's final Warner/Reprise contract requirement, and it would intensify the bad blood between the group's warring factions. Mike Love and Al Jardine decided that the whole group would retreat to the Maharishi University in Iowa for the winter, and so it did. There, band members would attend meditation classes and meetings, clear their minds, improve their concentration, and record their album. Group morale was at its lowest ebb, and the California natives could barely cope with the bitter cold. Al was in charge of production, so the results were predictably bland. *The MIU Album* was released in September of 1978, only to be generally ignored. It did feature better Brian Wilson vocals than the previous two LPs, but the weak songwriting and two-dimensional production rendered it instantly forgettable.

The album had one highlight, however, and that was Brian's moving composition "My Diane," written with Diane Rovell in mind. Diane was the sister of Brian's wife, Marilyn, and a longtime Beach Boys employee. Brian and Diane had apparently been romantically involved for quite some time, and the song was Brian's expression of anguish over the demise of their relationship. The lead vocal is provided by Dennis, and, as always, his emotional delivery imparts new layers of meaning to Brian's sad lyrics. Unfortunately, "My Diane" was poorly produced. It has a rough-mix or outtake quality to it. One reason for this is that Dennis didn't stay in Iowa long enough to do more than a couple of takes on the vocal. Film of the recording session depicts a distracted Dennis repeatedly checking the clock between his ragged

vocal takes, and advising an assistant to make sure his bags are ready to go. Minutes after finishing "My Diane," Dennis was on a plane, leaving the TM retreat far behind. *The MIU Album* crawled to number 151 on the LP charts. It is widely considered to number among the very worst Beach Boys records. Dennis had this to say about it: "I hope that karma will fuck up Mike Love's meditation forever. That album is an embarrassment to my life. It should self-destruct." It did.

Dennis and Karen Lamm had been on again, off again ever since their initial separation and subsequent divorce in 1977. For whatever reason, and although she had been badly injured, Karen kept climbing back onto the bucking bronco that was Dennis Wilson. "If you're worried about fidelity with a rock star, forget it," she says. "It's part of the lifestyle. The only absolutely intolerable thing Dennis ever did was to take drugs." Dennis was engaging in increasingly wild bouts of drug abuse and general debauchery, and though he kept rallying to win Karen back, he couldn't sustain the effort. In the summer of 1978, the two remarried, and though Karen knew Dennis's chemical intake had increased, she fervently hoped that love would carry them through. Dennis promised to clean up his act, and that September even checked into a Century City hospital to detoxify himself. I met with him at around this time, and I found myself confronted with a weakened, shaken, and somewhat disillusioned man.

When the Beach Boys toured Australia and New Zealand that winter, Dennis's flirtation with heroin nearly ruined the whole endeavor. This tour was an extremely high-profile one, and a lot of people were depending on the huge revenues it would generate. Promoted by David Frost and sold out months in advance, it seemed like a sure thing. Behind the scenes, however, there were enormous problems. Dennis had been caught not only doing heroin himself, but also sharing it with Brian and Carl. He had also physically assaulted Karen in a drug-induced rage; Karen had left for Hawaii to recuperate. Mike and Stan Love insisted that Dennis be sent back to the States immediately, but David Frost and his promotion company would have none of it, because Dennis was riding high in Australia. Sales of *Pacific Ocean Blue* were impressive, and in some circles his popularity had eclipsed that of the Beach Boys themselves. He was undoubtedly the focal point of the band's concerts in most of the Australian cities they'd hit. Frost knew that a successful tour depended upon a happy

audience, and the fans would be disappointed if Dennis was missing. So the tour continued, and huge amounts of money were made.

When I viewed the footage of that concert tour, I was shocked at the obvious effects that the drugs had had on Carl. The film reveals that in Melbourne, the Boys enacted a fascinating drama in front of thousands of confused fans. Though they manage to put on a solid performance for the enthusiastic throng, something has obviously gone wrong. Al Jardine and, to a lesser extent, Mike Love are forced to cover glaring holes left by Carl, who is unable to sing at his usual brilliant level. Clearly on a substance-induced bender, Carl grunts and growls his way through the set. His angelic voice has been turned into mashed potatoes. On "God Only Knows," he at one point sounds like Elmer Fudd on Valium. Then, suddenly overcome by the blinding glare of the stage lights, he pitches over like a rotten tree. The audience watches, horror-stricken, as he is whisked off the stage. The band plays on. Dennis seems to be on his best behavior at the Melbourne concert — he'd probably been chewed out by just about everyone who had something riding on the tour. He treats the Melbourne crowd to an especially warm rendition of "You Are So Beautiful," dedicating the song to their "beautiful island."

At the band's concert in Perth, Carl bravely apologizes to the audience for his Melbourne free fall. "I really screwed up," he admits on the tour footage, and the fans call out, "We love you!" Evidently touched, Carl returns the love with a bleary-eyed, sublimely drugged, heart-wrenching version of "God Only Knows." Considering that Brian is only partially functional, Carl is mired in opiated quicksand, and Dennis is in big, big trouble with practically everybody, the band does its job remarkably well. Its rendition of "Heroes and Villains" is especially compelling; Carl's tweaked vocal gyrations add the perfect manic quality to the abstract tune. When it comes to interpreting the *Smile* material, Carl is in an appropriately altered state, but his performance is woefully inadequate on some of the less adventurous songs.

It must be noted that without the workman-like Al Jardine, the Beach Boys would have floundered on this tour. Time and time again, it was Jardine who delivered the sharp, professional sound that the fans had come out to hear.

Members of the Beach Boys team during this period report that Carl was suffering from severe back strain and that he was making the potentially lethal mistake of mixing prescription medication with alcohol. Some believe he had joined Dennis as a permanent rider on the drug train. Carl was melancholy. His mood was so overpowering that it permeated the atmosphere of the entire Australia/New Zealand tour. Having recently separated from his wife, he had become a prime candidate for Dennis's lonely hearts club, and the two drew even closer together.

For Dennis, bad news was compounded by worse news. Karen was leaving him for good, his status within the band had been permanently damaged, and he was losing every skirmish with drugs and alcohol. As 1978 came to an end, Dennis Wilson seemed to be spiraling down into a very dark place.

8 BAMBOO

The Beach Boys' position among the rock-music elite was in jeopardy again. From the launch of the self-conscious "Brian's back" campaign in 1975 until now, the end of 1978, they had suffered in the public eye. Unprofessional behavior, infighting, bad judgment, and general ugliness: all of this had battered their image. Their status as a current act was eroding fast. To the major share of the record-buying public, the Beach Boys now seemed to be a more successful version of Sha-Na-Na. They were like a poor imitation of their former selves, the real-life Beach Boys version of Beatlemania, the traveling show that mimicked the Fab Four in action.

Mike Love had sealed their fate with his Beach Boys sound-alike single, "Almost Summer," put out by his own sideline group, Celebration. The song reached number twenty-eight on the *Billboard* charts in the summer of 1978, and it had "sellout" written all over it. Mike looted the band's image even further by providing Kodak with a bastardized version of "Fun Fun Fun" to sell cameras. These undertakings may have put a few extra dollars in his pocket, but they severely undermined the integrity of the Beach Boys. Since the release of *Endless Summer*, Mike Love has shown little regard for those in the Beach Boys camp who have urged restraint. Driven on by the profit motive, he has turned the band's art into a disposable commodity.

The world's most popular rock band in 1978 was the veteran English/American blues unit Fleetwood Mac. This pioneering group had survived huge personnel changes and reinvented itself as a pop-oriented outfit that could still jam with abandon. During this period,

the band was in the midst of enjoying unprecedented adulation generated by its multiplatinum LP *Rumours*, released the previous year. Consistent with his tendency to show up wherever big things were happening, Dennis Wilson could be found at this time within the Fleetwood Mac inner circle.

Fleetwood Mac keyboardist/songwriter Christine McVie was an essential element of the formula that had made the band so successful. She and her Mac counterpart, Stevie Nicks, had become two of the most identifiable female voices in rock. One day in late 1978, Christine encountered Dennis at Village Recorders in LA, where Dennis had been working on tracks for his second solo LP. For Christine, the electricity was immediate. As were so many others before her, she was hooked, and, practically overnight, she fell hopelessly in love. She would soon be announcing to the world, "Dennis has thrown me into the deep end, literally and figuratively." Christine was not at all the kind of woman who typically attracted Dennis's attention. She was blond and attractive, but most of Dennis's partners had "babe" written all over them. Christine did not, but she was charming, British, an accomplished artist, and blessed with a sweet and loving disposition. Dennis would soon find himself equally smitten, and the two quickly became rock and roll's most talked-about couple.

On the work front, Dennis Wilson was also busy creating beautiful music, despite the fact that drugs and alcohol were steadily taking over his life. His emotions ran the gamut. Sometimes, he would be at the top, inspired and ready to take on the world. Other times, he would hit bottom. When alcohol was involved, the work process would slow to a crawl. His voice was beginning to give out, so he'd often turn to Carl during his recording sessions; his brother would help him to realize the lovely melodies he was composing. When Dennis had stockpiled a good number of nearly completed tracks, his label announced that the second solo LP by Dennis Wilson was on the way and would be titled *Bamboo*.

The new recordings had a darker quality, reflecting the anguish that now seemed to inform the lives of all three Wilson brothers. Carl had become profoundly depressed over the state of affairs within the Beach Boys enclave. Brian had begun to drift back into a dissolute lifestyle. The recording sessions Dennis held were sometimes nothing more than drug parties for him and his brothers.

Dennis still possessed the inspiration to write wonderful music, and it seemed that a solo career was still within his grasp, but not for long. Sadly, his opportunity to fly on his own was slipping away. Soon it would be beyond reach.

Ratcheting up the pressure was the fact that the Beach Boys' new label, CBS/Caribou, was threatening to sue for breach of contract. The band hadn't delivered any music. Brian was unproductive and unpredictable. It became obvious that the sessions for the band's new record were going nowhere. So Brian implored Bruce Johnston to bail them out. In many ways, Johnston would stabilize the Beach Boys and give them a solid voice from this point on. In the short term, though, it was Johnston who would throw gasoline on the fire, becoming a catalyst for one of the all-time worst blunders the band ever made.

With the massive promotional machine of CBS Records behind it, everybody was expecting the new Beach Boys record to be a hit. Johnston had rejoined the band, and the decision was made to pursue a new direction, one that would break the creative deadlock that had brought the band so close to being served with a lawsuit. That new direction would be disco: the Beach Boys would attempt to update their image by recording a disco single. The disco-dance craze had rejuvenated the careers of veteran acts like the Bee Gees and the Four Seasons; both outfits had been recording disco tunes for several years. Why couldn't the Beach Boys also cash in by jumping on the four-year-old disco bandwagon? The answer was that disco had generated a major backlash among fans of guitar-based rock and roll. Disco relied on synthesizers, and programmed drum machines. It had a cold edge that many perceived as phony. The notion that the Beach Boys could gain new fans by exploring this insipid musical genre was a serious miscalculation. The profile of the average Beach Boys concertgoer was the exact opposite of the disco-lover's profile. Beach Boys fans bought Eagles, Doobie Brothers, and Fleetwood Mac records. They were not club-hopping trendies who boogied to Donna Summer, KC and the Sunshine Band, or Kool and the Gang. You didn't have to be the sharpest tool in the shed to figure out that a large proportion of those who were into the Beach Boys equated disco with something close to poison. All the sensational press releases, smiley photo ops, and market surveys money could

buy could not get these people to take their disco medicine. Not even a drop.

I spoke to a broadly smiling Bruce Johnston at a Beach Boys function in early 1979. "This next single will be the biggest radio hit for the Beach Boys in a long time," he predicted. "It is completely modern in its sound but still has a classic Beach Boys element to it." He then signed a vintage copy of the *Wild Honey* LP for a fan and circled one of the song titles on the back cover, an eleven-year-old Brian Wilson/Mike Love tune called "Here Comes the Night." That song would get the full disco treatment from producers Johnston and Curt Becher. To say it had a disco flavor would be a major understatement. It was so overblown, so cheesy-disco, that it almost seemed like an incarnation of the disco-hater's worst nightmare. Brian didn't participate in its recording. Dennis was entirely opposed to it from day one. Johnston rationalized this by explaining that there are aspects of disco that are guaranteed to turn off the "macho side" of the listener. "Look how macho city Dennis is," he remarked. "He's an example of what I'm talking about."

Released on February 13, 1979, the disco version of "Here Comes the Night" was met with instant disdain. Despite a strenuous promotional push, the single only limped to number 44 on the singles charts. When the Beach Boys performed it at New York's Radio City Music Hall, they were vigorously booed, and before the album that would include it was even released, the disco single was killed by CBS Records. The fans were angry. The band was embarrassed. So began and ended the disco career of the Beach Boys.

Dennis Wilson had temporarily put his plans for *Bamboo* on hold while the Beach Boys tried to throw together an acceptable album for their long-overdue CBS debut. Desperate for some strong new material, the other band members convinced Dennis to hand over some of his solo tracks. In his perceptive article "The Drummer with the Knack Was a Surfer," Domenic Priore surmises, "Dennis was being artistically abused by the Beach Boys in much the same way that they had been abusing Brian. They obviously didn't have enough good material for their debut album on their new label, so they nicked some of the better stuff" that Dennis had recorded. One of Dennis's new songs became the flip side of the disastrous "Here Comes the Night." Titled "Baby Blue," the lovingly crafted tune

features Carl singing lead in his soft, graceful style. The production is stirring and passionate, with piano, horns, and chorused guitar. When Dennis chimes in at mid-song with his "late at night when the whole world's sleeping" line, the emotional level rises. He is then joined by Carl and Brian, who deliver a beautiful bouquet of harmonies. In its melancholy wake, "Baby Blue" leaves us wondering how such a magnificent recording could have been squandered by pairing it with the disco debacle. "This kind of frustration played hard on Dennis," says Priore. Dennis was heard to say, "they're squashing me like a bug." In the midst of the controversy swirling around the band due to its brief stumble into dance music, Dennis's beautiful "Baby Blue" was hardly noticed.

On *The Harmony* and at Christine's Coldwater Canyon estate, Dennis and Christine communed, bringing their relationship to full flower. Dennis eventually moved into Christine's guest quarters, outfitting a tiny garden room with an upright piano, Tiffany lamps, and bits of silk and lace. A friend described the effect as "very Stevie Nicks." Christine was thrilled to have him there. "I'm in love with Dennis and I will marry him the minute he's free to ask me," she said. "I remember seeing them walk into Tower Records one day, and it was just regal," says Harvey Kubernik. He describes the rock-royalty aspect of the pairing: "She was a meticulously dressed, proper Englishwoman, and he had his shirt out and hadn't shaved. There was a barbaric element to Dennis because he made no concessions to the required visuals of society." The contrast of personalities that they represented had a physical impact — the two could not fail to be noticed and watched.

Riding the crest of a massive popular wave, Fleetwood Mac was in the process of recording its eagerly anticipated album *Tusk*, and Dennis was right in the middle of it all. His picture appears in the collage of images inside the LP jacket. He regularly participated in serious drinking contests with Christine's ex-husband, bassist John McVie, who could hold his own in any company. McVie's legendary battles with the bottle had been part of music-industry lore since his days with John Mayall's Bluesbreakers, during the early-sixties British blues boom. Dennis also befriended Mac guitarist Lindsay Buckingham, who grew to respect the talented and troubled drummer. "I knew him pretty well — he was a good guy," says Buckingham

(quoted on Dennis's Web page). "He was kind of lost, but I thought he had a big heart. I always liked him. He was crazy just like a lot of other people, but he had a really big heart, and he was the closest thing to Brian Wilson there was, too. He was halfway there." Buckingham's 1984 solo LP *Go Insane* contains a heartfelt tribute to Dennis entitled "D.W. Suite."

From 1979 through 1981, Dennis traveled sporadically with Fleetwood Mac's enormous entourage. Though Christine would have liked her lover constantly by her side, Dennis didn't enjoy tagging along — he did, however, occasionally surprise her by showing up unannounced. While he proposed to her in front of the entire band during a Hawaii stop, the two never wed. Their relationship endured for a rocky two years.

On the heels of the momentum-killing "Here Comes the Night," the Beach Boys released the oddly titled *LA (Light Album)* on the CBS/Caribou label in March 1979. The record contained a few nice moments, like the Brian/Carl collaboration called "Good Timin'." Sung by Carl and containing first-rate group harmonies, the song was the album's second single, and it scraped onto the top forty for a brief interval. Carl also contributed the willowy, "Full Sail," which must have been inspired by the days he'd spent aboard *The Harmony* with his brother. Another classic Carl Wilson composition, "Angel Come Home," served as a great vehicle for Dennis's unique voice. The song reflected the regret Carl felt over the failure of his marriage; it included both gentle and rocking passages, which Dennis handled beautifully. Dennis's "Baby Blue" stood out in the LP's lineup, as did his song "Love Surrounds Me." The latter possessed a modern edge that no Beach Boys song had ever displayed. It was alternately funky and spooky, with its slippery bass groove and Dennis's raspier-than-ever vocals. This eclectic track reaches its climax with a "Barnyard"-esque fade-out that showcases Christine McVie's lovely voice spreading light among Dennis's gravelly growls. It is a tantalizing glimpse of what the two might have given us had they completed their plans for a joint project. The erotically charged "Love Surrounds Me" is completely out of place on *LA (Light Album)*. Sadly, it is the last Dennis Wilson composition ever to be released on a new record.

The Beach Boys' new LP also included Brian's rollicking interpretation of "Shortnin' Bread," which has Dennis singing bass vocals in

At the Marina: Christine and Dennis with his now ever-present 'jug'

his best Mike Love style. Love himself contributed "Sumahama," a song so embarrassing that I will refrain from further comment. Al Jardine offered up his constipated epic "Lady Lynda," and though it does contain some shimmering harmonies, the song ultimately goes nowhere. Al had been perfecting this tune for some time, and its production is overblown, giving the lyrically thin composition a layer of pretension. "Lady Lynda" was the final single to be released from *LA (Light Album)*, and it died instantly.

Bruce Johnston had tried his hardest to save the Beach Boys from tumbling into the abyss. In fact, Johnston's production help on the album did little to alleviate the band's debilitating problems. As a whole, *LA (Light Album)* was an uneven and disappointing affair. If you liked one part of it, then you were sure to hate others. Dennis's fans hated disco and thought Mike's songs were silly. Mike's fans thought Dennis's voice was awful and found his songs too depressing. Brian's fans wanted more Brian. The result was that the album only made it to number one hundred on the charts. Despite being heralded with all the fanfare of a major-label debut, the LP was no more than a reflection of a band in disarray. No one agreed on anything, and nothing complemented anything else. Now the Beach Boys would have to go on the road and try to sell a product that nobody wanted.

Kicking off the promotion on their home turf, the Beach Boys participated in an autograph-signing session at Peaches Records in Hollywood. As the fans gathered at the designated time and place to greet their heroes, a very different scene was unfolding just a few blocks away. The plan was that the Boys would arrive together in a vintage woody, conveying the impression of nostalgia and group unity. At the assigned band meeting place, a parking lot, Brian Wilson was playing an imaginary baseball game with no balls or bats. He was running around the bases that weren't there when a limo pulled up with Carl inside. One by one, various vehicles deposited the remaining band members, transporting them from their separate existences to their job as Beach Boy-for-a-day. Once all six members, including Bruce, had assembled, they piled into the gleaming woody, surfboard attached, and headed out to the waves of fans.

Just as he'd done on the cover of the band's first album, issued seventeen years earlier, Dennis sat behind the wheel. The crowd

roared as the boys of summer arrived. Brian was present that day because the band's contract with CBS clearly stipulated that he attend all promotional events and concerts. The album signing at Peaches would actually be one of the last occasions on which all six Beach Boys would make themselves available to their hometown following in such a casual context. The fans waited in line to have an album signed or just shake hands with these living legends, and the Beach Boys gave it their all. Dennis did his part to keep things loose. When a fan innocently asked him to autograph a Rod Stewart LP, he drew a large penis on the cover with a magic marker and turned to Audree, who had turned up as well, shouting, "Hey, Mom — check it out!" Audree laughed, but some of the other band members visibly cringed as Dennis deflated their attempt to make a clean-cut presentation.

A sharper image was an important factor to some members of the band as they prepared for the tour dates and personal appearances scheduled for the coming months. Brian cleaned himself up nicely and looked much closer to the Brian of old, with shorter hair and a neatly trimmed beard. Dennis, however, was not prepared to remodel his image. His hair, longer than ever, hung well below his shoulders. His beard was thick and scraggly. He rarely wore anything dressier than a loose cotton workshirt and jeans, or khakis, with sandals. Publicity photos from this period depict the other Beach Boys sporting matching shiny down jackets; each jacket is emblazoned with a Beach Boys logo, and the name of each member is stitched on his breast pocket. Standing among this brightly clad group is Dennis, defiant in his rumpled shirt and jeans, hair spilling everywhere. The tension between the uniform wearers and the free spirit is palpable. For Dennis, the signature jacket represented a giant step backwards to the striped-shirt days of 1964. Groups are made up of individuals, and the Beach Boys had one of the world's premier individualists in Dennis. "He didn't abide a lot of the political crap that can surround an organization as big and influential as the Beach Boys," says keyboardist Mike Meros. His refusal to go along with the wishes of the band's more conservative element would keep him in hot water pretty much all of the time.

Still striving to promote their disappointing new album, the Beach Boys made an April appearance on NBC Television's music showcase *The Midnight Special*. They performed a few old hits and several

songs from *LA (Light Album)*. Brian was placed behind a piano, and he did his best to give the impression that he was actually participating. His stiff movements were like those of a circus bear who reluctantly goes through the motions dictated by his trainer. Mike Love told the audience a silly story about how they took their woody to a disco, after which the band executed a lip-synch rendition of the abysmal "Here Comes the Night." Dennis was allowed to sing Carl's "Angel Come Home," and he looked as though he was barely hanging on — he omitted an entire verse and lurched to the song's conclusion. Whether or not Dennis was high that night, he certainly had the look of someone on a major bender. Brian roused himself to take over the bass for the band's final tune, "Rock and Roll Music." Wolfman Jack and the Byrds' Roger McGuinn were on hand to provide background vocals. Although the performances were passable and Dennis's drumming was excellent, the chemistry was bad. Band members hardly glanced at each other. What had once been a warm, spirited, energetic group suddenly seemed old and tired.

With the knowledge that their new LP was failing to catch on, the Beach Boys took to the road for some major concert dates. That May, they played a sold-out show at the Nassau Coliseum in Long Island, New York. The lengthy set included Brian singing lead on "Sloop John B" and Dennis doing a much better job on "Angel Come Home." When Mike mentioned roller disco while introducing the song "Roller Skating Child," the fans began to boo, but once they realized that the song was not the dreaded disco detour "Here Comes the Night" they calmed down. Another tense moment came when grumbling was heard in the crowd between Al's "Lady Lynda" and Mike's "Sumahama" — many people didn't appreciate what they were hearing. Uncharacteristically defensive, Bruce insulted the audience, angry that they weren't allowing the band to try something "new." When the atmosphere finally lightened a bit, the group switched into high gear for the last part of the show. Dennis brought down the house with "You Are So Beautiful," and the rocking encore left everybody wanting more. The tour moved on to Massachusetts the next day. Throughout the spring and summer, as the band adhered to its grueling tour schedule, the tensions between its members continued to mount.

Mike Love was trying hard to get somebody to sign him to a solo

contract. He had recorded two album's worth of material at his Santa Barbara home studio and had contributed a track to Celebration's (thankfully) unreleased album *Disco Celebration*. He'd also submitted a song called "Skatetown USA" to Columbia Pictures for a proposed movie about roller disco. Columbia said, "No thanks." Then there was the album *Country Love*. With the urban-cowboy craze sweeping the nation, Mike speculated that this could be his ticket to solo success. When that venture fizzled, the ever-resourceful Love kept on pitching, and that summer he and Al Jardine managed to get their tune "It's a Beautiful Day" onto the soundtrack of the movie *Americathon*. The song had a catchy chorus and made good use of Carl's voice — it became an LA radio favorite for a few weeks. Belatedly — in October — the Beach Boys released the tune as a single but its moment had passed. It didn't hit. Mike would keep struggling to launch a viable solo career until his album *Looking Back with Love* was released in 1981. It was a critical and commercial flop. Mike's miserable artistic judgment had finally caught up with him.

One of the ugliest incidents in the checkered history of the Beach Boys occurred in June of 1979. The band was slated to play a sold-out date at the Universal Amphitheater in Los Angeles. A couple of friends and I decided at the last minute to see if we could get hold of some tickets. We fanned out across the parking lot in search of scalpers. As luck would have it, my two friends found seats together; I, however, wound up with a single ticket, and so I went my own way. As I entered the seating area, it was apparent to me that most of the audience was already settled in and that the show was just minutes away from starting. An usher directed me to my section, and I was amazed and delighted to discover that my seat was tenth row center: I'd be closer to the stage than I'd ever been at a major concert. Then I began to notice some familiar faces around me. Directly in front of me, in row nine, sat Audree Wilson. Next to her was Diane Rovell. Craning my neck around, I discovered that the Martins — as in Dean Paul and Ricci — were behind me. Suddenly it hit me. I was situated in the midst of the Beach Boys' extended family. Smiling, I sat back to enjoy the night's events.

The band's set was far from scintillating, and the feeling came over me that the Beach Boys had definitely lost a step. Their harmonies were somewhat ragged and their general energy level seemed low.

But my first inkling that something more serious was amiss came when Dennis staggered out from behind the drums. He was louder and looser than usual, and at one point he climbed on top of a piano and yelled indecipherable comments at the audience. Audree and the other inner-circle members around me began to shake their heads and whisper back and forth. Soon it was obvious that Dennis's tank was fueled and that the other band members were disturbed and angry about it. At one point during the set, Dennis was actually detained backstage by a Beach Boys security employee charged with controlling the uncontrollable. Soon enough, Dennis escaped and reappeared onstage.

Mike Love, especially, looked perturbed, and at one point he actually seemed to be goading Dennis. "There was never any love lost between Mike and Dennis, and that night Dennis seemed ready to even the score," remarks Mike Meros. The people around me gasped in horror as Dennis kicked his drums off the riser and took off after Mike. He chased him down the side of the stage and began to beat on him. I distinctly remember feeling like I was watching a car wreck surrounded by the family of the victims. Audree cried out, "Oh dear!" The others just held their heads as though they were trying to hide behind their hands. After the roadies, security personnel, and various band members finally separated the combatants and hustled them offstage, an unscheduled intermission was called. It had all happened so quickly that it took a couple of minutes for what I had witnessed to sink in. As I sat silently among the friends and family of the band, I wondered if it had all been an elaborate put-on. The grim faces of those who knew the band best convinced me that it hadn't been.

When the band returned to the stage, Mike made a speech downplaying the incident to the audience. Then Dennis appeared, grabbed a microphone, and began to repeat the words, "I love Mike Love." Appearing to ignore this incantation, Mike kept himself as far away from Dennis as he could. The quick-tempered boy in a man's body was always sorry for one thing or another. Dennis could not hold a grudge, and most who knew him found it easy enough to forgive his failings. This time, things would be different. The Beach Boys completed their concert. As always, the audience cheered every hit, celebrated every memory, and cherished every good vibration. Still,

something essential had been irreparably damaged that night. And for Dennis, there would be hell to pay.

It is not uncommon for bandmates, especially siblings, to battle it out, even in front of paying audiences. The Kinks' warring brothers, Ray and Dave Davies, were infamous for their onstage punch-outs. The Everly Brothers had physical confrontations on the concert stage as well. But Dennis Wilson upped the ante by having already landed in the doghouse as the result of various indiscretions. Mike Love was adamantly antidrugs. The fact that Dennis had said the words "Quaaludes and cocaine" to the Universal Amphitheater audience that night was more than enough to set him off. Mike was striving to keep the band's image clean, but with Dennis around he was fighting a losing battle. I believe that Dennis did love Mike. I also believe that Mike cared for Dennis in his own way. However, the two were polar opposites, and the tension generated by their philosophical differences had been tightening like a violin string. Now it had reached the breaking point. Dennis was always drunk and high. Mike was straight as an arrow, and Dennis considered him egotistical and self-absorbed. In a rush of inebriated bravado, Dennis had decided that his cousin needed a good ass kicking. Afterwards, he knew he had been wrong. He was sorry. But this time, forgiveness was not forthcoming. Shortly thereafter, Dennis Wilson was officially kicked out of the Beach Boys.

This could have been a good opportunity for him to muster his inner strength and get his act together once and for all. He could finish his second solo LP. He could enjoy some time with Christine McVie — the two might even have created a record of their own. But, instead of grasping his newfound freedom and using it to become his own man, Dennis became convinced that he wanted nothing more than to be a Beach Boy again. So many of Dennis's personal relationships had succumbed to this pattern: he would break a promise or breach a bond and then seek forgiveness. He did it with his parents and his brothers. He did it with Carole, Barbara, Karen, and Christine. Now he just had to have his band back. Would he adjust his behavior to please those who insisted that sobriety was his only hope? Not really. He would sincerely promise to change, but he'd always lapse back into his unrestrained lifestyle. "Dennis was aware of his drug and alcohol problems and not being able to settle down with one

woman," says Fred Vail. "He just always wanted to be a free spirit."

Ultimately, this is who Dennis Wilson was. And this was his path. His descent into self-destruction seemed to accelerate when his path diverged from the band's. Every attempt he made to change would be derailed by his compulsion to be the bad boy. From his earliest days as the middle child born between two talented brothers, that was his way of claiming attention. It was when his father scolded him or beat him that he felt his love. Outrageous antics and rule breaking were as natural as breathing for Dennis. Drugs and alcohol just pushed that behavior to an extreme, and when those substances got their hooks into him he didn't stand a chance.

When Dennis put aside his *Bamboo* project in late 1978, he fully expected to return to it the following year. He was proud of the work he had so far completed and liked to tell people that the second LP was nearly finished. "The next album is a hundred times what *Pacific Ocean Blue* is," he announced. "It kicks. It's different in a way. I think I have more confidence now that I've completed one project, and I'm moving on to another" (quoted by David Leaf). But subsequent events in the lives of Dennis and the other Beach Boys were to have a detrimental effect on the fate of *Bamboo*. Caribou executive and close friend James Guercio wanted an outside producer to help Dennis with *Bamboo*, but Dennis was very resistant to this suggestion and what had once been a smooth working relationship began to fray. Brother Studio had been operating at a loss for many years, and Carl and Dennis were forced to sell it (to jazz musician Tom Scott). "The problem with Brother Studio is that it started becoming a drug hangout," says Jerry Schilling. "Carl was not going to support that, and Dennis did not have the finances to foot it alone."

Dennis reacted to the loss of Brother Studio by developing a grand scheme to establish a recording facility in Hawaii. The strategy included the purchase of a twenty-acre parcel of land on the north shore of Oahu, where Dennis and other musicians could live and record in a scenic and peaceful atmosphere. He and partner Gregg Jakobson chose the name Sunset Studios and planned for the facility to operate under the umbrella of Bamboo Productions. However, the project never progressed past the initial planning stages — Dennis simply didn't have the necessary money, or focus, and he ultimately abandoned the project. Instead, Dennis moved his

recording sessions to the Venice Beach home of Beach Boys soundman Tom Murphy. The casual atmosphere of Murphy's sixteen-track home studio suited Dennis's erratic work habits, as did Murphy's tolerant personality. When a different sound was called for, sessions would be held at United-Western studio, among others.

Dennis's once-strong relationship with CBS Records had been considerably weakened by the Beach Boys' dismal record sales for that label. But the cruelest blow to Dennis as an artist was the total breakdown of his voice. After years of abuse, it had given out completely. Dennis was convinced that the real damage had been caused by a stray blow to his throat delivered by Stan Love during a recent fistfight. He underwent several operations to remove the damaged tissue, but he never gave his tortured vocal cords a chance to heal properly.

The tracks that Dennis recorded for inclusion on *Bamboo* projected a different sound and feel than those on his previous LP. Gone were the tinkling grand-piano motifs on which so many *Pacific Ocean Blue* songs were built. In their place was a dominant, moody, electric-keyboard sound. The productions were also comparatively stripped down, and they had a punchier quality. The two main thematic elements of *Bamboo* seemed to be sadness and wild abandon, mirroring the experience of their creator. The tracks from the *Bamboo* sessions used on *LA (Light Album)* had been slightly altered from their original state. "Baby Blue" had originally contained a fascinating, childlike whistling sound in its middle section, which was covered up by synthesizer and voices on the Beach Boys version. One early version even had an up-tempo honky-tonk passage, which preceded a return to the main theme. Carl also recorded a smoother lead vocal for the final version. As well, the *LA (Light Album)* version of "Love Surrounds Me" featured a few incidental production additions.

The most revealing and emotionally charged song on *Bamboo* is titled "It's Not Too Late." Possibly more than any other Dennis Wilson composition, it expresses the heavy mixture of torment, longing, sorrow, and hope that existed within the overburdened heart of this complex man. Here, Dennis pours out his soul, searching for that defining moment when he'd first experienced real love. He fantasizes about his lover's return. He imagines, "You've come to stay"; then he wails, "Please don't be long," as the brutal futility of his plea overtakes

him. Carl, contributing some excruciating bittersweet vocals, responds, "no, no, no, no, it won't be long," echoing the deep sense of loss that pervades this beautiful song. Never had a Beach Boys recording reached into a more private realm. Dennis and Carl had achieved something disturbingly real with "It's Not Too Late." Only two kindred spirits shackled by a common grief could have created such a haunting work.

Another highly original *Bamboo* track is the surprising "Companion," for which Dennis flew off into territory entirely foreign to any Beach Boy. The song is a whirlwind of Latin percussion rhythms fused with a progressive downpour of jazz woodwind. As these sound elements penetrate the listener's ears, the tune lands in a solid funky groove containing Dennis's vocal. The song was cowritten with longtime Beach Boys sideman Carly Munoz. Another track from the pen of Munoz is the eerie "All Alone," a painful examination of what a second chance at life might bring. To hear an emotionally decimated Dennis singing, "If I could live my life again. . . . I would never do you wrong," is to receive a chilling reminder of how far past the point of no return he had traveled. Backing him is a simple arrangement of electric keyboard, bass, and pumped-up drums. "All Alone" was eventually released as part of the 1998 *Endless Harmony* soundtrack CD.

Other strong *Bamboo* tracks are the all-out-rocking "Schoolgirl," featuring some of Dennis's signature snare slamming, and the relaxed and catchy "Wild Situation," on which the word "erection" is intoned as a kind of grand finale. There is also the quirky "He's a Bum," which was recorded in two very different styles: one version has a sparkling Hawaiian flavor; the other, recorded soon after *Pacific Ocean Blue* came into being, is more electric and bottom heavy. Some other tracks, recorded during the *Pacific Ocean Blue* sessions, would probably have been included on *Bamboo* as well — like the gorgeous "Tug Of Love," also known as "Feel the Pull." Finally, there is an ode to Dennis's indomitable spirit called "Moonlight." Rocking, loose, and light-headed, "Moonlight" expresses Dennis's inability to abandon his adolescent fantasies.

An amazing track that was proposed for the unreleased 1978 Beach Boys Christmas LP and also intended for *Bamboo* is the spiritually charged "Holy Evening." Dennis's take on this production-rich com-

position is sober and somber. The unique addition of bass harmonica and swirling bells create an atmosphere of wonder and nostalgia. Weary, heavyhearted, but ultimately hopeful, Dennis's voice vitalizes an epic arrangement featuring layers of angelic vocals courtesy of Marisa Conover. "When I came to the studio to sing my part, I was in awe of Dennis," remembers Conover. As the young singer began to lay down her vocal tracks, Dennis yelled, "Wait a minute!" Conover was amazed at what happened next. "Dennis turned off all the lights, except for some Christmas lights that magically lit up the stained glass windows he had installed in the studio." The atmosphere he'd created was perfect. After the session, Dennis took Conover to a chili-dog stand in his convertible Rolls Royce. "He was a hopeless flirt, but he was such a beautiful person," says Conover.

"Holy Evening" eventually saw the light of day as "Morning Christmas" on the 1998 release The Beach Boys' *Ultimate Christmas* — twenty years after it was recorded. The *Bamboo* project encompassed a range of highly original material; it was a vivid demonstration of just how much Dennis Wilson, the artist, had grown. The fact that it covered very different terrain from *Pacific Ocean Blue* also indicates that he was still developing as an artist. Dennis habitually took risks with his music, as he did with his life, and *Bamboo* stands as a clear reflection of the dark and light sides of Dennis Wilson circa 1979.

Once it became obvious to CBS/Caribou that *LA (Light Album)* was an all-around failure, the label cut way back on its support for the Beach Boys. In fact, cutbacks were executed on many levels, and when Tom Murphy was terminated as a Beach Boys employee, the reason he was given stunned him. On the flight back to LA from an East Coast concert appearance, the Beach Boys hierarchy informed Murphy that they were "very disappointed" that he hadn't "finished Dennis's record." "I was fired for not finishing *Bamboo*!" Murphy exclaims, still baffled. "I was just an engineer. No one told me I was a producer. I was thinking I should let Dennis do his record as he wants to, when he wants to, and how he wants to. As far as Dennis was concerned, it wasn't finished yet." Of course, Dennis still wanted to work with Tom, so the two continued their working relationship independent of the band that had already "officially" dumped Dennis. Comments Murphy: "Dennis was a very talented person with great creative ideas in the studio who was, for the most part, fun to work

with. The hours were hard because I didn't do drugs and to keep up with him was difficult. He had sparks of amazing creativity and lots of destructive bouts of erasing things, destroying things, and not finishing things." Murphy would conduct sessions with Dennis through the even more difficult period that lay ahead. He continues to love and respect the memory of his friend.

Dennis's relationships with the members of Fleetwood Mac reached their peak at about this time. The levels of wealth and fame that Mac had attained made the Beach Boys seem minor league, and Dennis enjoyed sharing their affluent lifestyle. By this time, he had burned practically every available bridge back to the Beach Boys. And although he subjected Mac members to the same type of horrendous shenanigans that had so thoroughly alienated him from his own band, the Fleetwood Mac contingent somehow still liked having him around. Unable to resist the obvious temptation, Dennis made love to Stevie Nicks just when he was supposed to be settling down with Christine. He also returned to Karen on a fairly regular basis — he just couldn't seem to give her up. To make matters even more insane, he began cutting a passionate swath through the entire Fleetwood Mac extended family, leaving no female untouched. "Dennis had sex with every woman that was in any way remotely involved with Fleetwood Mac," says a close friend. "Singing members, wives, girlfriends, secretaries — every one. It was unbelievable."

One night, while Lindsay Buckingham and Stevie Nicks were working at Village Recorders, Dennis, Christine, and Ed Roach stopped by. "We all started talking about Brian," remembers Roach. "Stevie and Lindsay were saying what big Beach Boys fans they were when they were teenagers." Then, in a casual a cappella style, Buckingham and Nicks started singing Brian's old song "The Farmer's Daughter" from *Surfin' USA*. Dennis teased Christine, saying, "See, I told you we were good." At that point, Dennis and Ed left the studio to paint the town. In the early morning hours, they returned, worn out, to pick up Christine. "We knocked on the studio door and Christine unlocked it to let us in," recalls Roach. "She had tears running down her face and said, 'My God I was hoping it was you guys!'" When Dennis asked, "What's the matter? Are we late?" Christine just led them quietly back into the studio. She wanted them to hear what had made her so emotional. Lindsay, Stevie, and Christine, all fighting tears,

played back the arrangement of "The Farmer's Daughter" they had been working on all night. "Dennis freaked out when he heard it, and he started crying, too," says Roach. A short time later, their beautiful rendition of Brian's classic song would reach a whole new audience as a cut on a Fleetwood Mac live album, but on that early morning in Los Angeles, it only served to remind Dennis of how much he missed his band.

As 1980 got underway, the Beach Boys remained firm in their belief that Dennis Wilson was an unnecessary distraction. The disappointing performance of their last LP had prompted them to concentrate their energies on recording a strong follow-up. The brass at CBS/Caribou continued to hold out hope that the next offering might help the label recoup part of the huge investment it had made in the legendary combo. With the forever upbeat Bruce Johnston leading the show, and with Brian on side as a contract requirement, a new album was quickly completed. Titled *Keepin' the Summer Alive* and released in March of 1980, it had a more balanced feel than its predecessor. Carl, Mike, and Al were all very involved in the recording process. At the dawn of the new decade, the Beach Boys appeared united, but something was clearly missing. A young drummer was brought in to replace Dennis. His name was Scott Matthews, and Dennis had always been an inspiration to him. Matthews recognized the void Dennis's absence had created within the band: years later, after Dennis had passed away, he remarked, "Dennis was the fossil fuel of the Beach Boys."

During the band's promotional appearances for *Keepin' the Summer Alive* and in a film documenting the recording of the LP, no mention was made of Dennis. Presumably, all concerned hoped that no one would notice that the popular drummer had vanished. On the album cover, the band is shown sealed inside a plastic bubble, performing for a penguin and two polar bears, an image that perfectly illustrated the absurd position the Beach Boys now found themselves in. The world had come to view the band as a one-trick pony that regurgitated the summer of 1963 over and over and over again. Dennis was actually depicted in this cover shot, perched behind the drums, but his heart and soul are nowhere to be found on the album; aside from a couple of drum tracks scavenged from earlier sessions, his input is entirely missing from *Keepin' the Summer Alive*. The Beach Boys

tried to have it both ways: Dennis was too unruly, too chemically altered, to rely on as a full-time band member; he was also so popular, so essential to their image, that they weren't prepared to cut him loose completely. For awhile, then, Dennis floated in Beach Boy limbo.

The single chosen to kick off the new album was called "Goin' On," and it featured an intricate harmony figure exhumed from a *Smile* track, which Mike filled out with a whisper of melody. The production was nice and mainstream — unfortunately, the single only managed to make number eighty-three, and the LP died at number seventy-five.

A couple of Carl's *Keepin' the Summer Alive* tracks, cowritten with Randy Bachman of Guess Who and Bachman Turner Overdrive fame, hinted at the direction the youngest Wilson was now headed in. Carl had also begun thinking about breaking away, and his efforts to complete a solo album intensified. *Keepin' the Summer Alive* closes with Bruce Johnston's schmaltzy "Endless Harmony," a tune about the Beach Boys as seen through rose-colored glasses; this song title would be chosen as the name of Alan Boyd's excellent 1998 documentary chronicling the group's career.

As *Keepin' the Summer Alive* racked up lackluster sales figures, CBS Records came face to face with the fact that it had made a big mistake in backing the Beach Boys. Author William Gaines explains that label president Walter Yetnikoff had earlier expressed his frustration bluntly: "I think I've been fucked."

Dennis and Christine's relationship was now under severe strain. Exploding into drunken rages, Dennis would storm through Christine's house like a bull in a china shop. During one of his rampages, he accidentally burned the guest quarters to the ground, prompting Christine to say to Gregg Jakobson, "A bit excessive, your friend Dennis — isn't he?" Often, he would tear off in Christine's Rolls Royce — he crashed it several times, leaving her to pick up the pieces. Dennis would recover his senses enough to express his sincere apologies, and the kindhearted Christine would inevitably allow him back into her life. Sometimes, Dennis would disappear somewhere for a week at a time, leaving no trace of his whereabouts. On those occasions, he would arrange for some of his friends to entertain Christine. "When Dennis lived with Christine, there was always

activity in the house," says a close friend. "He could keep the circus going without even being there. It might be a day or two before she even begins to notice he's missing." During one drug-fueled binge, Dennis slammed his own Rolls Royce into a cement wall while traveling at over one hundred miles per hour. Miraculously, he and his horrified passenger walked away from the collision; and they were astonished to discover that the sturdy Corniche had sustained only minor damage. Dennis, bedraggled and sheepish, crept back home to Christine to recuperate.

"Christine really loved Dennis," asserts Fred Vail. "He really cared for her, too. He was very affectionate, but you couldn't rope him." One night, when Vail was staying with Christine and Denny, Christine arrived home from a marathon Fleetwood Mac recording session. "She came in and asked, 'Where's Dennis?' I said, 'You know Denny — he'll be back.' So she sat up with me all night and wanted to hear about Dennis, about the Dennis of the sixties and our experiences. She wanted to know him, share these things, and find out what made him tick, what he needed, what she could help him with." The road she traveled with Dennis would only become rougher; the fact that she was so wealthy just increased Dennis's ability to acquire and consume illegal substances. Some say that Dennis got large amounts of cash out of Christine, who, in 1980, was one of the world's most successful recording artists. Others contend that Christine actually used drugs as a lure, a way to keep Dennis around. Wherever the truth lies, it's undeniable that Dennis's intake of cocaine reached its zenith during this period.

Also around this time, it wasn't uncommon for fans or other innocent bystanders to find themselves witnessing the sometimes alarming behavior of the Wilson brothers at close range. The following account is but one vivid example. Not long after he'd arrived in LA, Keith Reeves, a green twenty-two year old from the East Coast, landed a part-time soundman job at the Troubadour Club on Santa Monica Boulevard. Reeves had always idolized Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys, and a friend of his, a member of a local band, told him that he knew Dennis Wilson and could arrange a meeting. The friend got back to Reeves with an address in Venice and told Reeves to meet him and Dennis there one afternoon. Excited to meet one of his boyhood idols, Reeves prepared himself carefully: "I dressed in

white pants and a striped surfer-type shirt and even combed my hair in a style similar to Brian on the old album covers." But this was 1980: it never occurred to the naïve young man that the Beach Boys depicted on the cover of *All Summer Long* had ceased to exist ages ago.

"I had smoked a little pot in the past and maybe tried coke once, but for the most part I was pretty straight," continues Reeves. He was about to receive a crash course in drug use. "When I arrived, there were maybe eight or nine other people just kind of sitting around, looking very hazy, and I am immediately introduced to Dennis. He looks kind of greasy and maybe like he's been up for a couple of days, but he's very friendly. Though Dennis seems kind of groggy, he can see I'm a sincere fan and he hugs me, saying, 'You're all right, kid!' I'm immediately torn between 'Uggh! *This* is Dennis Wilson?' and "Wow! This *is* Dennis Wilson!' It's kind of that 'We're not in Kansas anymore' kind of feeling. Then Dennis whips out a five-gram coke vial and the lines start cookin' and of course I want to be a part of things so I join in. The next thing I know I'm pretty high, but Dennis just seems to wake up a little. He starts pounding out some tunes on the piano, and the afternoon is whiled away drinking, coking, and listening to Dennis play. All of a sudden, Dennis jumps up and yells, 'We're going to the liquor store!' Since everyone else is too fucked up to walk and too busy chopping lines and smoking joints, I'm elected to walk to the store with Dennis. When we get there, he grabs a couple of half-gallon bottles of vodka but then realizes he doesn't have any money. He turns to me, the Beach Boys fan, and yells, 'Loan me some money!' So I take out my wallet, and he grabs the one twenty I had then sees the hurt look in my eye and says, 'Don't worry kid. I'll play you some songs when we get back,' and I said, 'fine.'" A slightly shaken Reeves walked back to the house with his longtime hero, who was now rapidly shrinking to human proportions.

"So, when we get back to the house, more lines, more booze, more joints, and I'm tap dancing somewhere on Jupiter by now, and I realize this is just an average day for Dennis," says Reeves. He marveled at the sheer quantity of drugs and alcohol being consumed around him. "It's getting to be night time, and it's cold in Venice, so Dennis decides to light a fire and starts throwing paper and wood in the fireplace. He's really impatient and wants a fire right now, so he

douses the fireplace with a bottle of cologne. As soon as he lights a match, boom! It explodes, and suddenly Dennis's shirt is on fire. He holds his arm up in front of his face and yells, 'Ahhh! My arm's on fire!' Everyone else is so high they barely even look up. I freak out, I grab him, throw him on the ground, wrap him in a rug, and we're rolling around. He's yelling, and finally I get the fire out." Still disturbed at the memory, Reeves continues his story. "He just burned his shirt and singed the hairs on his arm, but now he decides I'm his buddy for life, and he bear hugs me and thanks me. Then Dennis sits back down at the piano and asks what I would like to hear, and I say "Got to Know the Woman." At this point, Dennis burst into a frenetic version of the boogie-woogie classic from *Sunflower* with Reeves joining him on vocals. With his arm still smoldering, Dennis entertained his young friend as if his life depended on it, and the surreal evening raged on.

"Now," says Reeves, "Dennis is trying to thank me by giving me more and more cocaine, and I'm higher than Mount Everest. I'm thinking I better get out of here because I'm either going to die or get thrown in jail. Right then, there is a loud knock on the door and Dennis yells, 'Keith — answer the door!' So there I am, feeling like my head is going to explode, and I stagger to the door in my white pants, striped shirt, and surfer hair-cut. I throw open the door, and there, standing in front of me, is three hundred pounds of Brian Wilson! Greasy hair, spittle in the beard, in pajamas with dirty bare feet, and he stunk." Brian barked, "Where's Dennis?" and Reeves stood there, incredulous. "There is my idol I have always worshipped, but he looks like Haystacks Calhoun in a bathrobe. Brian pushes past me, hugs Dennis, and the two sit down at the piano. Brian then whips what looked to be an ounce of cocaine out of his robe, drops it on top of the piano, and they stick straws in it and start snorting." The Wilson brothers proceeded to play a duet with traces of coke still in their beards, but Reeves had had enough. "I turned and ran out the door without even saying goodbye, and as I tried to drive home without killing myself, I wondered how long a guy who behaves like Dennis could possibly stay alive."

This would not be the last time Keith Reeves would see Dennis Wilson, but when the two met again, Reeves would experience the wildest Beach Boys' other side. "A few months later, Dennis came by

the club when I was working one night, and he found out I was there. He had Christine McVie with him, and the two came up to the sound booth to say hello. Again, he broke out some coke and partied with me. After the club closed, Dennis and Christine went down and sat at the grand piano on the stage." With only Reeves and a couple of lucky employees who'd happened to stay late as their audience, Dennis and Christine played and sang until the sun came up. "We just sat and watched them and it was magic and beautiful," recalls Reeves. "They played a few songs that they had written together, and they were wonderful. Dennis said they planned to record them soon, and the contrast in their voices made for a unique and memorable sound. I only wish I had taped it. I really got to see Dennis's sensitive side that night, and I'll never forget the feeling.

Mike Love and Dennis had moved beyond the breakdown of their relationship, which had occurred the previous summer. With the help of restraining orders and a couple of bodyguards, the Beach Boys organization attempted to reintegrate Dennis into the touring group. Mike insisted on visual confirmation that Dennis's "orange juice" bottle was out of the drummer's possession before he would agree to take the stage. No official explanation was ever given as to why Dennis had disappeared from the band for almost a year, likely because the reasons behind his suspension were not — in the eyes of those intent on fighting the losing battle to maintain image control — for public consumption. In any case, most fans felt that Dennis's return made the Beach Boys seem whole again. When the band played Knebworth, England, Dennis was back behind the drums. Asked by the British press about Dennis's prolonged absence, Bruce Johnston replied, "Believe me, if Dennis didn't want to be here he wouldn't be here." Then he sarcastically added that Dennis "went on some 'camping trips' and missed a couple of tours, but now he's back."

Glad to be a Beach Boy again, Dennis delivered his usual solid backbeat to the huge Knebworth crowd. Before the band performed the classic ballad "Surfer Girl," he dedicated the song to "my surfer girl, Christine McVie," and the British audience roared its approval. Dennis was experiencing the old camaraderie again — being a Beach Boy gave him a sense of belonging that he could not do without. Keyboardist Mike Meros identifies the Knebworth show as the first occasion he and Dennis connected musically. "Before that, Dennis

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had always been a little skeptical of me," says Meros, who remained with the band for many years. "But after Knebworth, it changed. Dennis was the kind of guy that had to delineate his turf to let you know who was boss. It was that old-style locker-room kind of thing. But when he came to know you, he would let down his guard more completely than any of the others and take you in as a friend."

By the Fourth of July, when the band gave a free concert in front of the Washington Monument in Washington DC, Dennis had shaved his beard and cropped his hair. He was looking very uncomfortable. Film footage of the concert captures his unusually tight body language and his joyless eyes. It is apparent that Dennis is locked in a struggle with his addictions, and here, on film, we see the first clear evidence of the physical toll those addictions had taken. The once explosively powerful drummer seems barely able to keep up during the later stages of the concert, and Bruce and the others keep shooting concerned glances in his direction. The enormous crowd is, of course, oblivious to this: the era of the Beach Boys concert performed on autopilot is in full swing. Carl would comment that the band

could play horribly and fans would still come up and say, "That was the best show I've ever seen!" Such reactions disturbed Carl deeply — he was the Beach Boy who always cared most about the band's live presentation — and within a few months he would leave the group temporarily.

In December of 1980, the Beach Boys appeared on a special segment of *The Mike Douglas Show* shot in Hawaii. Brian was absent, Bruce Johnston was on board, and the five Beach Boys augmented by their touring band performed an oldies set before a typically enthusiastic crowd. What made this performance unique was that the group set up on Waikiki Beach with picturesque Diamond Head in the background. During the interview, Dennis pointed out to Mike Douglas that this was the first time the band had ever performed on a beach. It seemed incredible that in nearly twenty years of live shows the Beach Boys had never played on the beach. Douglas reminded Dennis that it had been almost twelve years since the band had appeared on his show. Listening to the hoarse, weatherbeaten, strung-out-looking drummer's responses, the veteran television host was visibly saddened by his obvious deterioration. In 1969, when the Boys had last graced Douglas's stage, Dennis had been a strikingly handsome, physically robust twenty-four year old. He'd had a twinkle in his eye, and his whole life lay ahead of him. Now, in 1980, his hourglass was running out.

9 THE END OF THE SHOW

It was just another stop on an endless string of cities, stadiums, airports, and hotels. Just as he had so often done over the previous two decades, Dennis Wilson sat in a bar waiting for show time, nursing a Meyer's rum and orange juice. His companions listened intently as he related sweet moments of his long history in the business. Among them sat Mike Meros, the affable young keyboardist who had become a faithful foot soldier in the Beach Boys crusade. "Meros, you want a drink?" said Dennis. "Sure," replied Meros — "make it a vodka and grapefruit juice." Dennis was in a cheery mood that afternoon, and his friends were enjoying his company.

As the intensity of the tales increased, so did the drinking. After he'd treated everyone to several more rounds, Dennis asked Meros, "Are you feeling those drinks, Mike?" A warm buzz building in his head, Meros responded, "Yeah, Dennis. I better cool it. I'm starting to feel a little loose." Laughing, Dennis threw his arm around Meros and declared that he'd been ordering him straight grapefruit juice all along. Meros insists that Dennis was pointing out to him that the good times were good with or without alcohol. Yet Dennis never took that lesson to heart.

The twentieth anniversary of the Beach Boys as a performing entity was coming up fast. Manager Jerry Schilling did his best to raise media awareness of this landmark event in the history of rock and roll. No other act had maintained such a high level of success over

such a long period of time. It was unfortunate that this anniversary had to come at a time when the band's popularity was in yet another downward trend. In fact, things were in serious disarray. Dennis's bad habits were a constant distraction. Schilling struggled to prop up the image of a band that had already used up more than nine lives but still refused to die. Part of his strategy was to have the band appear on *Good Morning America*, hosted, via remote, by Joan Lunden. The show had a vast audience, and Schilling was anxious that the band make a good impression.

Al, Mike, Brian, Carl, and Dennis sat on a sofa while Lunden interviewed them. It quickly became apparent that Dennis was not in any shape to be on live television. The other band members were well dressed and attentive, but Dennis looked like he should have been at home sleeping off a major binge. Bleary-eyed, grinding his jaw, his long hair falling across his face, unable to hold his body in an upright position, Dennis was the Beach Boy Lunden opted to question first. He slumped, slouched, nodded off, and paid little attention to Lunden — he'd entered his own world. His answers were either unintelligible or nonexistent. "Evidently Dennis had been partying more than the rest of us," says Schilling. "That's the beauty of Dennis — he's unpredictable."

Mike Love was clearly seething. Something had to be done, so Schilling joined the group on the sofa in an attempt to save the day. "It was very embarrassing to Mike," says Schilling. Carl began to answer the questions directed at Dennis, but instead of letting the semiconscious Dennis off the hook, Lunden kept coming back to him. Halfway into the segment, Dennis still hadn't managed one coherent response, so finally Lunden turned to Brian. Resembling a three-hundred-pound deer caught in the headlights, Brian wasn't much more functional than Dennis. When Lunden asked him what kind of music he liked to listen to, Brian stared fiercely at the camera and said, "I listen to a song called 'Be My Baby' by the Ronettes." Lunden probably didn't know that the obsessive Beach Boy had listened to that particular song over and over, hour after hour, day after day, year after year, but the look on his face was enough to send the exasperated talk-show host off in a different direction. At last, she allowed Mike to speak, which, of course, he did very lucidly, but by this time it was too late. The drug-fueled, weirded-out Beach Boys'

Good Morning America appearance was being discussed over coffee around the country.

On December 30, 1980, the Beach Boys were honored with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. The ceremony began early on a sun-drenched Southern California afternoon at 1500 Vine Street in the heart of old Hollywood. Master of ceremonies Johnny Grant entertained the assembled fans with his showbiz patter, the Beach Boys were vigorously cheered, and everyone seemed happy. But, as the official presentation began, it became apparent that Dennis was missing. When Bruce Johnston stepped up to the microphone to be the first Beach Boy to speak, many in the crowd began to shout, "Where's Dennis?" His efforts to duck this question failed, so Bruce quipped, "He's at the beach!" Of course everybody laughed: on the day the band is to be admitted to one of the entertainment world's most hallowed institutions, Dennis, *the* Beach Boy, has gone off to the beach. The truth was somewhat darker. Dennis's participation in any band event was by now contingent on his sobriety. I asked Brian that day if Dennis would be with the band at their concert that evening. Befuddled, he peered around for a moment then glanced fearfully into my eyes and said, "I'm not sure. He might be."

The show I'd asked Brian about was the Beach Boys' twentieth anniversary concert, to be held at the Los Angeles Forum, a venue with a seating capacity of 17,505. Heavy promotion was required to achieve a sellout. A few years earlier, the Beach Boys could have easily sold out the Forum on consecutive nights, but their popularity had been fading in Los Angeles. Just as it had in the past, the Beach Boys' home base was deserting them when the going got tough.

While Dennis had been banned from participating in the anniversary concert because of his drinking, he desperately wanted to be a part of this significant event. When rehearsals were held that afternoon, he was locked out. That night, as Priscilla Presley introduced the band, Mike, Al, Carl, Brian, and Bruce took the stage. Dennis suddenly appeared in the backstage area. Jerry Schilling had been saddled with the task of keeping the troubled drummer off the stage, but he couldn't bring himself to do something so cruel. "Dennis was there, and before you knew it he was on the drums," remembers Schilling. "He did a great show, and I was glad he got to play that one."

From this point on, Dennis's appearances with the Beach Boys

The Beach Boys — without Dennis — receive their star in Hollywood

KEITH REEVES ARCHIVE

were sporadic. He wanted so badly to be part of the band, but he would not stop drinking. "It got very sad," says Schilling, who was the one who had to tell him he couldn't play. "He was getting thrown out of the band, and he would call me to ask why." The answer was simply that Mike Love had laid down the law when the drinking-related incidents became too frequent. "Sometimes I felt it was too harsh to tell a Beach Boy that he can't play in his own band," recalls Schilling. "I would know that it wasn't a unanimous decision. I don't think Carl would have ever banned Dennis from the group."

Brian and Dennis were holding secret sessions at Village Recorders during this period, committing to tape some songs they had written together at the Venice Beach apartment of their friend Garby Leon. The productivity of this collaboration seems to have been very limited, although one unreleased gem titled "Oh Lord" gives us a sense of the musical terrain the two talented brothers were exploring. Brian covered lead vocals, Dennis played keyboards and produced, and the result is troubling and beautiful. Brian's performance is profoundly emotional, and Dennis's stark production allows Brian free rein. Writer Domenic Priore has described Brian's voice on this cut as

"coming from a place of extreme pain and deep spiritual anguish." Another similarly affecting Brian and Dennis collaboration written during this period was called "Night Blooming."

Material displaying such depth of feeling stood little chance of being accepted into the Beach Boys' repertoire — if it didn't mention "fun" or "sun," then Mike and the others blew it off. Still, Dennis labored over a new musical for the stage that he was creating with Leon. He was somehow able to give birth to moving passages of music, mirroring Brian's own knack for creating unique progressions, while being dragged down by emotional turmoil and substance abuse. Some of his private composing sessions were taped by a friend. One night, at Leon's apartment, Dennis ran through a song and then started talking about alcoholism. "It's all a state of mind," he reflected. As soon as those words were out of his mouth, one of Leon's neighbors, disturbed by the noise from below, began banging on the ceiling. Dennis jumped up angrily, ready for a confrontation, and Leon told him that the man's name was Harry and he was eighty years old. Stopping in his tracks, Dennis replied, "Oh. . . . Fuck you Harry!"

Those who knew of the sessions at Leon's and at Village Recorders worried about the quantity of drugs that were being consumed during them. Some of the Beach Boys had long blamed Dennis for Brian's frequent relapses, but those who witnessed their interaction at those secret recording sessions remember it differently. A close friend of Dennis's remarks, "Brian would chastise Dennis for his drinking and then lean over and snort a huge line of cocaine. He'd be smoking a cigarette *and* a joint and tell Dennis he shouldn't drink." Dennis would actually offer his brother hamburgers as an enticement to stay and work on their music, but as far as drugs went, neither Brian nor Dennis needed any encouragement — they were always more than ready to ingest whatever was available.

Over the next couple of years, no effort was spared to keep Brian and Dennis apart. Who knows what might have developed had the two been able to pool their remaining resources and reach for a new place? "I remember the two of them playing so beautifully together and really enjoying each other's company," says Trisha Roach Campo. "I thought to myself, 'My God, it might not be the best environment for Brian healthwise, but as far as what was going on musically, you

can't fuckin' beat that!'" Yet whenever certain members of the Beach Boys clan found out that Brian was sequestered with Dennis, they would come and take him away, literally slamming the door on the creative process. Simply put, Dennis provided Brian with a natural outlet for his art, while the others pressured him to churn out more hits. When they were together, Brian and Dennis were two kids from Hawthorne, sitting in the backseat of their father's car, just singing and having fun; but the moment they'd try to carry their ideas into the recording studio, the plug would be pulled.

As Carl toured behind his solo LP, released in March of 1981, the Beach Boys remained in a precarious state. Carl had been patient. He'd put up with more than most people could handle. But the fact that he couldn't get Mike and the others to rehearse to his satisfaction left him feeling that it wasn't even worth trying anymore. This development was bad for Dennis. He was dependent on the support that Carl had so faithfully given him from within the band, and now he'd have to relinquish it. He just couldn't do it. When Carl was asked to take on the prominent job of opening for America during its 1981 Hollywood Bowl engagement, Dennis wasn't about to stay away. Carl launched into his first set in front of the huge audience, then his drunken brother burst onto the stage, grabbed a microphone, and started yelling. "Dennis came onstage, and he was pretty much out of it," remembers Jerry Schilling. "Dennis was trying to be supportive — he just wasn't able to be. It was very difficult trying to get him offstage without embarrassing him and everyone else. It was pretty bad from an audience point of view." America's Gerry Beckley informed Carl that even though he, too, loved Dennis, such behavior was intolerable. If Carl expected to finish the engagement, he'd have to get Dennis under control.

Brian, now in very poor shape, was missing concerts regularly. He still hated touring and had to be watched at all times while traveling with the band. The press had announced his "comeback" with such fanfare that people expected to see him when they attended a Beach Boys concert, but Brian had bottomed out again. In fact, the 1980–81 period may have been his worst. One member of the Beach Boys touring band relates an incident that illustrates the precarious state Brian was in. "We were eating at a restaurant near the hotel we were staying at prior to a concert appearance in the Midwest. All of the

band and the whole entourage were there enjoying a meal before the show. This particular restaurant was next to the airport, and as we sat and ate, we could look out the window at all the planes taking off. We're sitting there looking out at the tarmac, and we see a plane getting ready to take off, and there is Brian in the plane looking at us. He had convinced some guy to fly him somewhere, anywhere. He just wanted to leave. So everyone jumps up and runs out yelling, 'Stop the plane! Stop the plane!'" Eventually, Brian's bodyguard/babysitter was able to retrieve him, but the overall attempt to contain the reluctant rock star was clearly failing.

There were Beach Boys concerts performed in 1981 without the assistance of a single Wilson brother, to the extreme disappointment of many ticketholders. Mike Love released his solo LP the same year, but he never deluded himself that his personal gravy train was anything other than the Beach Boys. He became desperate to get a consistent tour lineup in place. The only members of the core group who could be counted on to show up for every concert were himself, Al Jardine, and Bruce Johnston. Selling a Wilson-less Beach Boys show was a difficult trick to pull off, but Mike would master it by the late nineties. In 1981, every possible means of keeping at least one of the brothers traveling with the band was exploited.

At the root of the problem was the painful fact that Brian, Dennis, and Carl all hated what the Beach Boys had become. They deeply loved the music they had created together and respected each other's talent, but they'd come to despise participating in an ongoing oldies revue. They were fed up with the chronic shortage of fresh material, the shallow performances, and all the strategic and creative constraints. Their little vocal group had become a monster. Now, in their twentieth year, it seemed as though the Beach Boys had been in the ring too long. To make matters worse, Capitol had released a single containing a medley of 1962–66 Beach Boys hits. The four-minute, randomly edited collage of Brian's jewels stormed to number twelve on the charts that summer, giving the group its biggest hit in five years. It also bolstered the public perception of the Beach Boys as an act immersed in oldies quicksand, a traveling museum.

In July of 1981, Mike produced a simulcast television special shot at *The Queen Mary* in Long Beach, California. The Beach Boys managed to draw a big audience for the event, but they were obviously

underrehearsed. Carl was absent, and though Brian and Dennis were both in attendance, neither was in very good shape. Carl's sweet vocals were sorely missed. Brian attempted to cover for him, but on songs like "God Only Knows" and "Good Vibrations" the results were horrifying. Preparing to take the stage, looking like a man facing the guillotine, Brian called this "the longest day." His vocals were strained and offkey. Without Carl as a shield and a buffer, Brian displayed all of his deficiencies to the live and viewing audiences. Dennis pounded his drums, supporting his big brother as best he could, but he had severe problems of his own to grapple with — Brian was essentially alone and sinking.

Backstage at this debacle, Dennis ran into an old friend from his simpler days of hot rods and surfboards, high-school buddy Dick Dixon. When Dixon asked how he was doing, Dennis rasped, "I'm so burnt." "He was having some big problems with Mike and seemed to acknowledge his life was at a point of personal erosion," says Dixon. Asking Dennis where the happiness was in his life, Dixon got this response: "I don't have it. I'm just here. I'm like a flower floating on the water. Whatever way the wind blows is the way I go." Dennis's second wife, Barbara, once made the chilling remark, "I think Dennis died years before his body actually did." In some sense, the Dennis Wilson whom Dixon encountered that July day was already a walking corpse.

The battered heart of Christine McVie could finally take no more. In 1981, Christine realized that she had no more forgiveness left to dish out. She had once called Dennis her "multifaceted jewel," but her descriptions of her lover had become less flattering. Drummer Mick Fleetwood, who had introduced them to one another, says (on the Fleetwood Mac Web site), "Chris almost went mad trying to keep up with Dennis, who was already like a man with twenty thyroid glands, not counting the gargantuan amounts of coke and booze he was shoving into himself." Christine's final gesture to Dennis was a lovely song titled "Only Over You." In it, she reflects on the difficulty of loving a man with a habit of being gone; she admits to being aware that others think she's "crazy" and a "silly girl" for putting up with it all. But Christine had longed for a future with Dennis, and "Only Over You" is one last declaration of love. Released in 1982, after the couple had parted, the record bears a simple message on its sleeve:

"Special thanks for inspiration to Dennis Wilson." Over the years that followed, Christine stayed away from Dennis, and she would never comment publicly at any length about their time together. She would just say (as she did to *Rolling Stone*'s Michael Goldberg), "Half of him was like a little boy, and the other half was insane."

One of the biggest blows Dennis sustained in this period was the loss of his beloved *Harmony*. The sailing vessel was a financial millstone, and Dennis's income was too inconsistent to support it. American City Bank, which had financed *The Harmony*, was forced to repossess; the bank finally auctioned off the elegant craft when Dennis's payments fell too far behind. If there had been any possible way to keep hold of what had been his absolute passion for the last seven years, Dennis would have found it, but at that point he was barely hanging on. He lived day by day, trying to summon the strength to kick his addictions. He'd been reduced to being a part-time musician and a full-time barfly; he was no longer tan, muscular, or handsome. He was known around Venice, where he now lived, as a cocktail-lounge regular. Most days, he could be found holding court at one of several local watering holes, entertaining the other patrons and buying drinks for — or bumming drinks and cigarettes from — those who could not ignore his still formidable charm. One woman I spoke to said that Dennis "seemed to hang out in this area a lot. We ran into him lots of times in different bars. He seemed to be a really nice, polite guy. I remember buying him cigarettes one night because he didn't have any money. I thought it strange that he didn't even have $1.50."

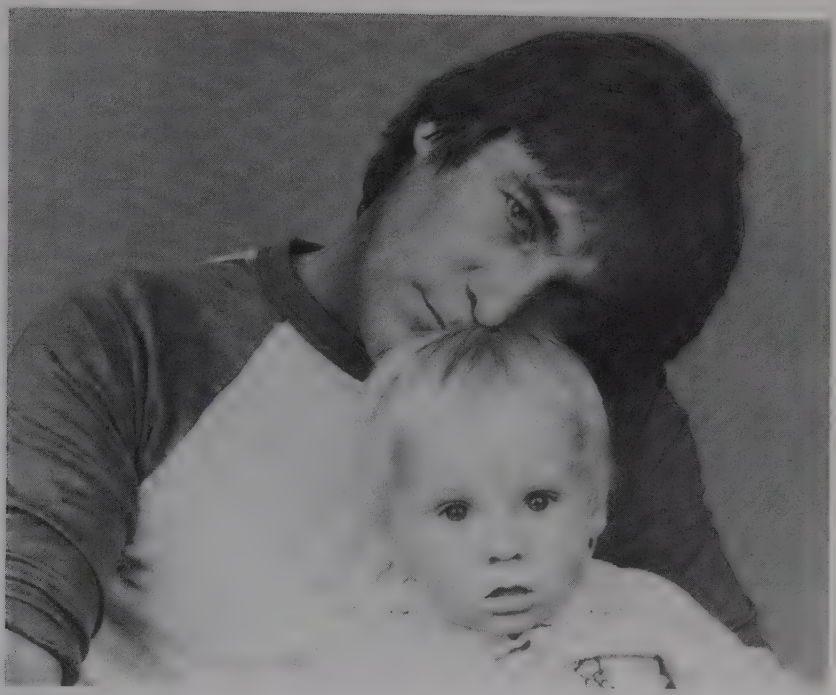
Dennis had sustained so many physical injuries during his drunken escapades that he'd begun to slump. His taut muscles and erect posture were just a memory. He'd developed a paunch. He'd cut his hair and had his right bicep tattooed. The face that had once captivated thousands looked older than its years. Dennis had been in so many fights and accidents that his nose had been broken several times. His jaw had been pummeled in a few fights as well, and his mouth no longer had that trademark sensuous pout. His hands were permanently swollen and twisted. "I remember seeing how bludgeoned his hands were after so many brutal whacks with his own [drum] sticks," says Mike Meros. "I believe those hands were always in a state of needing bandages, though I never saw him use them." But despite

this dramatic physical deterioration, Dennis could still attract women. It was as easy as saying "Hello." There was something about him that remained irresistible to the opposite sex — one woman in particular, named Shawn, would offer no resistance. And she would become the next Mrs. D.W.

Venice, California, circa 1981 was a bad place for a man in Dennis's predicament to be. It was a refuge for cocaine dealers, and many residents were either addicts or gang members. Dennis lived in a rented house on Wavecrest Avenue, a couple of blocks from the infamous Boardwalk, and this neighborhood in particular was considered a party haven. Consistent with his lifetime habit of generosity, Dennis continued to lend a helping hand to anyone who needed it, and before long his house was filled with crashers and transients. Among the parade of girls moving in and out of his life during this time was a young friend of his teenage daughter, Jennifer. The blond waif's name was Shawn Love, and she caught Dennis's attention mainly because of her claim that she was the illegitimate child of Mike Love.

Shawn became a regular at Dennis's never-ending party, and soon she had moved in, causing the unimaginable to occur. Before the year was out, Dennis was the father of his first cousin's grandson. This would be the neutron bomb to blow Mike's shiny head to kingdom come. Mike — already alienated, already furious — went ballistic. In his mind, an out-of-control, philandering druggie with no morals or self-respect was now his son-in-law. He himself, however, was no paragon: by 1981, Mike had divorced his fifth wife, and several women claimed he had fathered their children out of wedlock. To Dennis, none of this really mattered once Shawn decided to give birth to their child. What did matter was the love he had for his baby boy, Gage.

While residing in Venice, Dennis gained a certain notoriety for harassing drug dealers. Late at night, he'd go to the houses of people he already owed hundreds of dollars to and yell through the door, "Wake up! I just want a gram. Just a gram and I'll go." Realizing that Dennis was not about to let up, fearful of attracting unwanted attention, the alarmed cocaine suppliers would inevitably let him in. Sometimes, Dennis would talk his victims into letting him cook the cocaine for freebasing, bragging that he was an expert at it. Then he



Some thought Dennis's love for Gage would give him the strength to straighten out

KEITH REEVES ARCHIVE

would purposely make the chemical concoction explode, ruining the merchandise. "He would do this just for fun," remembers a close friend. "He loved to get into hassles with dealers just to get some coke and then purposely drop it into the carpet." When a rattled dealer would try to throw Dennis out into the night, Dennis would just prolong the psychological torture. "He'd start up about how they had to replace it for free," remembers his friend, who often witnessed this insanity. When his frightened friend would tell him that this wasn't fun anymore, Dennis would respond, "Yes, yes — this is so much fun!"

That same year, Dennis befriended a vagabond Venice street musician named Slavin' Dave. "Dave was a legendary alcoholic who was a regular on the Venice Boardwalk," explains a friend. "He played a beat-up guitar and would do insane versions of 'Gloria' for, like, twenty minutes. He was missing his teeth and acted real crazy.

Dennis just loved him." So much so that he decided to take Slavin' Dave along to a Beach Boys concert to be one of the opening acts. "Dave got picked up in a limo and he got fed on the jet," remembers Ed Roach. Arriving at the concert site after this first-class treatment, Dave was heard to remark, "Wow! Is that what rock and roll is like?" When the other Beach Boys saw Dennis's new discovery, memories of Charles Manson popped into their heads. "Dave got backstage and was practically tackled," remembers Roach. "Dennis was dragged to a dressing room to be scolded and yelled at. They shoved Dave back into a limo, stuck him on a plane, and sent him right back to LA." So ended the rock career of Slavin' Dave, but Dennis made it up to him. He moved Dave into his own bedroom at the Wavecrest house; Dennis and Shawn moved into a large closet.

The Beach Boys decided to make improving the health of Brian Wilson a major priority in late 1982. After holding many strategy meetings and collecting advice from a team of experts, they decided that Brian must be forced to submit once again to the extreme control of Dr. Eugene Landy. Saturated with drugs, weighing in at 320 pounds, Brian had hit rock bottom. Carl had made peace with the other Beach Boys and was back with the group. If they could clean Brian up and get him writing again maybe they would be able to regain a little of their lost luster.

All the band had delivered to its frustrated label since 1980 was a compilation of older material titled *Ten Years Harmony*, and it had met with a complete lack of interest. While the album's track lineup showed little imagination, it did contain Dennis's sparkling "San Miguel" (its first official release) and an unreleased *15 Big Ones*-period recording of the oldie "Sea Cruise." The latter featured Dennis's solid lead vocal; a quirky synthesizer blast juiced the otherwise sloppy production. Generally, though, the album was filled with familiar material that most fans already owned in one form or another. When the Beach Boys had signed their big contract with CBS five years earlier, the label never expected that this would be the kind of Beach Boys product it would have to push.

By the end of 1982, band members had made several desperate attempts to get Dennis into rehabilitation programs, and though Dennis always agreed to cooperate, he could never maintain his resolve. In a last-ditch effort to wake him up, the band cut most of

HENRY DILTZ

his income. Everyone knew that any cash that came his way would be spent on sustaining the vices that were so rapidly destroying him. Dennis's final push to finish his second solo album had also been undermined by his inability to stop drinking. "When we were trying to finish the *Bamboo* record, Dennis kept getting so drunk I had to stop the sessions and drive him home rather than finish the mixes," says Tom Murphy. "My creative side said, 'I'm not going to finish the mixes without Dennis because it's Dennis's project.' In hindsight, I wish I had just finished it. I would have never thought he was going to die. I thought we had time."

A new distraction for Dennis was the failure of his fifth marriage. Though he and Shawn lasted about as long as a cup of coffee, Dennis was head over heels in love with his infant son. For a time, Shawn and Dennis lived in a rented house at 6120 Trancas Canyon Road in Malibu, but within a few months they'd initiated divorce proceedings. Dennis's fascination with Gage never wavered, however, and most photographs of Dennis taken during the last year of his life show him cradling the beautiful blond boy lovingly in his arms. "Dennis would go on endlessly about his child Gage," says a member of the Beach Boys' touring band, "detailing every smile and every little move he

made." Many felt that his devotion to Gage might even give him the power to conquer his alcoholism, but it gradually became clear that by heaping attention on the baby he was avoiding the painful task of focusing on himself.

On the day that Gage was christened, Dennis walked along Trancas Beach with his old friend Ed Roach. He had a simple, tragic request to make: "I'm not gonna be here in a year. Eddie, you need to help look after Gage." Roach had seen Dennis flirt with death so many times, but he'd always expected him to survive. He responded to his friend's disturbing statement with levity: "No, we're going to be all arthritic and in our eighties and you'll still be chasing sixteen-year-old girls." Dennis stopped, shook his head, gazed sadly out at the ocean, and murmured, "No. I'm telling you the truth. I know this is going to be."

Of all things, a public-relations gaffe on the part of the Reagan administration propelled the Beach Boys back into the national consciousness in the spring of 1983. Interior Secretary James Watt bad-mouthed the band and its fans to the press. Claiming that the Beach Boys' audience would abuse drugs and alcohol on the site, he announced that the band would be excluded from the administration's Fourth of July concert, held each year near the Washington Monument. The concert, which had regularly featured the Beach Boys and had routinely drawn half a million fans, was an Independence Day tradition — like fireworks displays and backyard barbecues. The public backlash was immediate and severe. Watt had made things even worse by naming Wayne Newton as his choice for a replacement act. Along the boulevards of most American major cities, "Honk if you love the Beach Boys" signs sprouted. So many people honked, made phone calls, and wrote letters, that Watt didn't know what had hit him.

Within days, the public outcry had become so vehement that President Reagan himself attempted to defuse the situation by presenting his friend Watt with a model of a foot sporting a bullet hole. Without a doubt, Watt had shot himself in the foot. Government spin doctors prescribed humor — and assurances that all Reagan people were big Beach Boys fans. But behind the scenes heads were rolling. The Beach Boys had campaigned for Vice President George Bush in 1980 during his bid for the presidential nomination; the band

had played several benefit concerts for Bush, contributing significantly to his cause. The Bush family remained loyal to the group, and Reagan wasn't about to tear down an American icon that his fellow Republican had so energetically endorsed. The Beach Boys were invited to the Reagan White House for a special concert, and before long James Watt was packing his bags.

The Beach Boys relented and allowed Dennis to join them for part of the 1983 spring and summer tour. He badly needed the money. That summer, touring-band members were shaken to discover that Dennis had begun to experience severe alcoholic seizures. Drummer Mike Kowalski was brought in as a second drummer to help cover for Dennis when he was too sick or too drunk to play well. When Dennis was trotted out for his "You Are So Beautiful" encores, the spectacle of a physically wrecked Denny Wilson shocked the band's audiences — he brought to mind Elvis on his last round. While he would gamely attempt to engage the crowd, as he'd done so many times before, with his song's message of gratitude, he could only manage a painfully hoarse whisper, and the message would be all but lost. "I saw Dennis after not seeing him for many years," says Ricky Fataar. "He came backstage at a gig I was playing and could barely speak. I thought, 'Oh no, this is bad.' I wondered what was wrong."

Declining fast, Dennis still found a way to remain outwardly cheerful. He'd regale the musicians on that last tour with tales of his beloved Gage or his newest puppy. He would proudly describe his passion for gardening, detailing the progress of his flower beds. On a certain level, his appreciation of life remained uncontaminated — innocent and pure. "He had the softest heart," says drummer Bobby Figueroa. "He really did not like to see people get hurt and I think it's because he was hurting inside a lot. The heart, the softer side of him — people don't realize how huge that was."

He continued to give away whatever he had to give. On the band's tour stops, he'd open a tab for members of the backing band so that they could charge whatever they wanted to his account. Whether they found themselves at a hotel in a major city or an out-of-the-way resort, Dennis made sure everybody had what they needed to be comfortable. "That was very generous and something that none of the other guys would have thought to do," says Mike Meros. Guitarist Ed Carter remembers, "He was constantly helping people out, having

them live with him. Dennis was such a generous man, giving away tons and tons of money and belongings. He was always taking in stray cats and stray people and providing for them. He was known as a Good Samaritan, but he never really took care of his own finances. I remember him taking grocery bags of clothes on the road rather than suitcases — it was incredible."

Periodically, Dennis would be fired with the determination to straighten himself out. During a Seattle Beach Boys concert in May of 1983, playing in front of a huge stadium audience following a Mariners baseball game, Dennis was obviously in very bad physical shape, but he appeared to be sober. He did everything that was asked of him. He stayed out of the way of the other band members and just played his drums. No slurred commentary to the audience, no standing on pianos — he simply beat his drums, strong and happy. Even when Mike made a travesty of John Lennon's "Imagine," Dennis smiled and kept the beat. He was earnestly trying to stick to the program. Soon enough, though, he would stray from the course.

On the Fourth of July, the Beach Boys played a hugely successful engagement in Atlantic City, New Jersey. The James Watt incident was fresh in everyone's mind, and America's revitalized heroes again found themselves looking down from the top of the mountain. No one could have predicted it. The Beach Boys were suddenly being celebrated throughout the nation by virtually everyone — from politicians to journalists to radio DJs to the average citizen. That year, 1983, would see the start of a new phase of the Beach Boys legacy. Brian was beginning to show signs of recovery, Carl was guiding the live band to new levels of professionalism, and the energy was surging. Yet one ominous cloud loomed on the horizon: Dennis was losing his grip on life.

That Fourth of July, Dennis pounded his drums with all the passion and power he had, holding nothing back, giving everything away. "There was a photo of Dennis I always wanted to take but never did," says Mike Meros, who was on keyboards that night. "Dennis under the stage lights, steam rising off his drenched body in an all-consuming cloud. I saw that so often. He always gave one hundred percent. In fact, one of Dennis's trademarks came nearly every night, when, after the last beat of whatever the last song was, he refused to stop. He would continue on in a wild bashing coda that some of us

would occasionally join in on. It was as if he just couldn't get enough."

On July 17, the Beach Boys were received at the White House as guests of President Reagan, who was anxious to repair the damage caused by James Watt's mouth. The occasion was a birthday celebration for Vice President Bush, and the band had been asked to perform a short set. The Reagans clapped and swayed to the good vibrations. The national press had a field day with the made-for-primetime photo op of Ronnie and Nancy hugging and smiling, surrounded by their fellow Californians. But Brian, for one, was uncomfortable with this sudden affiliation of the Beach Boys with the Republican Party. "Bipartisan means you don't take sides," he said. "We have that image with the public. We're not known to America as either Democrats or Republicans. I just know we have a following and can draw a half million people on the Fourth of July"(quoted by Nick Wise). That day inside the White House, as the president professed his love for the Beach Boys, it was impossible for anyone to ignore Dennis's failing health. Though he smiled broadly just like everyone else at the gathering, he was bloated; he looked a bit like a melting candle. The bottle had reclaimed him, and he had been drinking heavily throughout the day. As the band and the First Family posed for pictures, Mike Love seemed to be trying to insert himself as a buffer between Dennis and the Reagans.

The Beach Boys were invited to a reception at Vice President Bush's residence that evening. Attending this affair was their longtime friend and associate Fred Vail. It would be the last time Vail would ever see Dennis. He was dismayed at the condition his friend of twenty years now found himself in, and, like most of those who cared for Dennis, he badly wanted to help. It was obvious that without a radical behavior adjustment, Dennis would not last much longer.

A couple of months later, the Beach Boys flew Dennis to New York to enter a well-known rehabilitation program. Once again, Dennis almost immediately aborted this attempt at detoxification. He'd checked into the Parker-Meridien Hotel, and he was drinking at the hotel bar when Nashville producer Nelson Larkin happened by. Larkin was a friend of Fred Vail, and when he told Dennis he worked for Fred, the two fell into conversation. When he left the bar, Larkin called Vail in Nashville right away. "He told me DW was

in real bad shape," says Vail, "so I called Denny and asked if he wanted me to come help him. I told him I'd fly out and help him get through it, but like Denny always did, he said, 'Oh, no.' He sloughed it off. He said, 'Don't worry about it. I'll take care of it. I'll lick this.' He never wanted to admit he couldn't do it himself." Relating this story to me, Vail was still upset by the memory of Dennis slipping away, although fifteen years had passed since that phone call. Vail would never have the chance to talk to Dennis again.

The Beach Boys shows went on. Dennis habitually arrived late, and everyone agreed that he looked terrible. In August, at the Napa County Fair, a fan named Les Chan presented Dennis with the first issue of Chris Duffy's fan magazine, called *Dennymania*, and a membership card to Duffy's Friends of Dennis Wilson fan club. "Somebody did this for me?" asked an obviously touched Dennis. He showed off the little fanzine to the other band members. This simple, heartfelt tribute had given him a moment of hope.

On September 3, 1983, Dennis took the stage for his final concert as the Beach Boys' drummer. It was at the New York State Fair in Syracuse that the band rocked out to Dennis's beat one last time. At the end of the show, he stood waving to the appreciative audience long after the other Beach Boys had left the stage. "Thank you very much for everything I've ever dreamed of. . . ."

One day while Dennis was still living in Trancas with Shawn, he got set to head off to the Trancas Market with Ed Roach. His business manager, Bob Levine, had set up a charge account at the little store so that Dennis could buy groceries there. On his way out the door, Shawn handed him some mail that had just arrived. Dennis shakily thumbed through the stack, needing his first drink of the day, when one particular envelope caught his attention. It bore the large, embossed seal of the Vice President of the United States of America. "Wow," Dennis shouted to Roach. "Look at this!" Ripping open the envelope, he extracted a personally signed letter from George Bush thanking him for his performance at the birthday celebration and ending with the words, "If there is anything I can ever do for you, let me know." Dennis looked up at Roach and then back at the letter. The word "anything" seemed to be glowing and flashing. A devilish grin crept over Dennis's weathered face. "Look at that," he croaked. "Do you see what that says? Can you imagine how I'm going to make that man pay for that?"

Dennis celebrated Gage's first birthday with the rest of his children. Family photographs of the occasion show him with his kids wrapped tightly in his arms. Dennis was very physically expressive — he loved to touch people, especially his own children. Although Scott, Jennifer, Carl, Michael, and Gage would go for long periods without seeing their father, when he was with them he'd constantly caress or hold them. "Dennis was a great father to all his children," says his first wife, Carole. "Though he wasn't always with them, he made sure the time they spent together was special." Whether they were involved in a long, complicated game of hide and seek or just sitting and talking, Dennis knew how to capture the imaginations of his children. Dennis had always possessed the innocence, the wonder, the unbounded energy of a child, and his children recognized him as one of their own. He understood them on a level that most adults could never access.

During the same month, Dennis took to walking the beaches in the area known as the Strand, where he had learned to surf as a teenager. As he and his young friend Waldo Chester checked out the local scene, Dennis was amazed at the beach-culture buzz that had electrified his old stomping ground. While it had been active and exciting when Denny was sixteen, by 1983, the Manhattan Beach Pier area throbbed like a Mardi Gras beach party. The surfers looked like little children to Dennis — barely out of diapers — and the girls were so young and beautiful, wearing the skimpiest bikinis. Waldo and Dennis were taking turns sipping discreetly from a plastic container of rum and orange juice when Waldo noticed that an expression of bewilderment had transformed his companion's haggard face. "What's wrong, Dennis?" he asked. Slowly, Dennis shook his head. His bloodshot eyes glazed over. "Nobody knows me anymore," he rasped. "I used to know everybody down here. It's so weird. I feel old." The two made their way back to Chester's 1966 Impala, which was parked near El Segundo Boulevard, and Dennis didn't say another word.

During the last months of his life, Dennis was once again exiled from the Beach Boys due to yet another drunken incident. His income was cut off completely, and he was forced to move Shawn and Gage into the seedy Santa Monica Bay Inn. He now had no home and no car — he couldn't drive anyway because of his violent alcoholic seizures. He spent many of his last days bumming rides from friends and

sleeping on their couches. Says Karen Lamm, "I'm sure nobody could imagine the Dennis Wilson they saw barefoot, skidrow, hanging around Venice . . . looking gorgeous in a tuxedo like he once did." A tiny bar across Ocean Avenue from where Shawn and Gage were staying became Dennis's haunt. This dark, hole-in-the-wall, named Chez Jay's, provided Dennis with a sanctuary in close proximity to his child. There, he could fortify himself with alcohol and quell the shakes long enough to give his little boy the attention he needed from his father.

One night, Dennis stumbled out of Chez Jay's, where he'd been hanging out with Ed Roach, and began stopping cars on Ocean Avenue. Penetrating the fog that filled his troubled mind was the knowledge that his band was playing in town. Suddenly, he was compelled to join them. He stopped one startled motorist and yelled, "I need a ride to the County Fair! I'm with the Beach Boys and I've got a show!" Roach firmly guided him out of the middle of the busy street, promising to hire a car and get them to the concert venue. When they arrived, Dennis quickly alienated the rest of the band with his obnoxious behavior. Mike and the others would not allow the situation to get out of hand. A restless Dennis watched his band perform from the wings, well out of the audience's view. The next night, Dennis showed up again, and this time Carl invited him onstage to say hello to the fans. Though he was not permitted to perform, he badly wanted to touch the audience. All he could do was wave and smile. The gulf between Dennis and his beloved fans was getting wider and wider.

His thirty-ninth birthday came and went. Dennis struggled to borrow enough money to pay the rent. There was only one way for him to get back on the Beach Boys payroll: he'd have to complete a rehabilitation program. So, on December 23, he checked into St. John's Hospital in Santa Monica, where he was put under the care of Dr. Joseph Takimine. His agenda was to detox over a twenty-one-day period. Dennis spent Christmas Eve suffering through tremendous physical withdrawal; his body craved its usual diet of alcohol. He passed the night trying, unsuccessfully, to reach his brothers and his mother by phone. On Christmas Day, his will failed him yet again. He bolted from the hospital and tracked down Shawn and Gage at Shawn's mother's house in Santa Monica. "He said he was really

lonely and that he wanted to be with us on Christmas," Shawn told *Rolling Stone*'s Michael Goldberg. After spending a little time watching his baby boy open his Christmas presents, Dennis disappeared.

A friend named Chris Clark found Dennis wandering the streets of Santa Monica after an all-night binge. Fearing for Dennis's life, Clark deposited him at the Daniel Freedman Marina Hospital. This time, Dennis walked out after only an hour. He wandered around the Venice area and continued to drink throughout the day. He'd have seizures, black out, and wake up not knowing where he was or how he'd gotten there. Dennis was now irrevocably locked in a revolving door of pain and confusion without hope of getting out on his own. While all this was going on, his family searched for a solution, but nobody could agree on what to do for Dennis.

James Guercio had been lobbying the Beach Boys and the Wilson family to appoint him Dennis's legal conservator. Over the holidays, Carl and Audree joined Guercio at the Caribou Ranch in Colorado to discuss this and other matters. Carl had come to the conclusion that Dr. Eugene Landy, whose radical treatment seemed to be helping Brian, might be Dennis's last hope. In fact, Carl had already had some discussions with the controversial doctor. According to manager Jerry Schilling, "There were talks, but Dennis was totally against it. Dennis would never accept Landy." Landy had reservations, too; he feared that Dennis, unable to control his quick temper, might attack him physically. There was a lot to resolve, but Carl decided to put off implementing plans until after the first of the year. But for Dennis, the first of the year would never come.

While wandering on the Westside beaches, Dennis hooked up with Crystal McGovern, a nice-looking, raven-haired young woman who accepted his unpredictable ways and allowed him the freedom he needed. They were together only occasionally, but Dennis appreciated Crystal's willingness to embark on spur-of-the-moment adventures. The two found their way to Marina Del Ray, and when Dennis saw the harbor, thoughts of those golden days aboard *The Harmony* flooded his troubled mind. Dennis was well known in this tight community where outsiders are viewed with a wary eye, because it was at the Marina — across from a modest row of Marquesa Way condos called Villa Del Mar, at a dock accessed through a locked metal gate — that he had berthed his prized vessel.

The Dennis Wilson who'd hung out with the drunks, druggies, and transients of Venice was just as comfortable hob-nobbing with millionaires at the Marina. It was a quality that made him irresistible to old friends like Bill Oster. Oster had been Dennis's neighbor at the Marina during better times, and on that December afternoon the two men had a reunion of sorts. As guests of Oster, Dennis and Crystal spent the afternoon and evening enjoying the lifestyle that Dennis had once enjoyed. Aboard Oster's yacht, *The Emerald*, they talked late into the night. Dennis fortified himself with screwdrivers and talked about how he would find a way to buy back *The Harmony*. "If anybody else had been drinking the way Dennis was drinking, they would have been smashed," Oster told Michael Goldberg. "But Dennis drank like that normally. I don't think I ever knew him sober." Oster insisted that the couple stay the night — a night at the Marina sounded like heaven to Dennis.

Sleep had always been an elusive commodity for Dennis. His irregular sleep patterns signaled the abuse he'd suffered as a child, and his alcoholism only exacerbated the problem. His night sweats had become worse and worse. Crystal McGovern explained to Michael Goldberg that on the night they spent aboard *The Emerald*, "Dennis was sweating like I had never seen him sweat. It was just dripping down his face. I was mopping his forehead constantly." In the middle of the night, he awoke and lay there listening to the water slapping gently against *The Emerald*'s hull. The loss of *The Harmony* and of so many other precious elements of his tattered life weighed upon his spirit. If only he could tell his dad how much he loved him. If only he could be given another chance, he would be a good son. "Every once in awhile he'd say, 'Honey, what are we going to do?'" remembers McGovern. Then he'd cry, "I can't sleep, I can't sleep." After thirty-nine years of sleeping trouble, Dennis Wilson was a very tired man.

The next morning, with the fresh sea air filling his lungs, Dennis bounded about *The Emerald* like a little boy in a tree house. His first order of business was to mix himself a screwdriver. He and Bill Oster had a great time tooling around the Marina in a tiny rowboat, surprising old friends. That gregarious Beach Boy was back. Marina inhabitants knew that Dennis could be a pain in the ass, but they loved him anyway. Many were saddened by the evidence of his physical

deterioration. For Dennis, always searching for a place where he could be accepted, where he could find a sense of belonging, the positive greetings he received that morning were a blessing.

Back on board *The Emerald*, everyone had lunch; Dennis then astonished his companions by announcing that he was going for a swim. The water was a chilly fifty-eight degrees — it was December 28, after all — and Dennis was pronounced crazy. With a deep laugh, he dove in, dressed only in cutoff jeans, and began to swim around the dock. He'd been in and out of the water a few times when the idea struck him to dive down beneath where *The Harmony* had been docked. There he discovered remnants of his past life, still resting on the Marina floor. He surfaced, brandishing a picture that had been thrown from his boat in a moment of anger years earlier. The seven-year-old photograph was of Dennis and Karen during their happiest days, and it was preserved within the sterling-silver frame that James Guercio had given them as a wedding gift. Dennis wiped the mud from the frame and placed it on the dock. Again, he went down. The curious little boy who had rummaged in his neighbor's trash cans all those years ago in Hawthorne still resided somewhere inside the battered body of Dennis Wilson. He couldn't resist. This was a treasure hunt.

As Dennis continued to comb the floor of the Marina, his friends started to worry. Oster paced the dock, smoking a cigarette, hoping Dennis would soon tire of this risky escapade. He called out, "Dennis! What did you find?" There was no response.

It could have been that vodka-soaked thoughts of *The Harmony*, of Karen, of the past, merged dreamily with the everpresent hopelessness, self-doubt, sadness, and fear. Maybe the faces of Gage, of family and friends, rose vividly in his mind's eye as his lungs filled with water. Alone, submerged in that dark, cold seawater, Dennis let go, and his life came to a silent end. The boy who had come racing out of the ocean one summer day to convince his brother, and then the world, that the sea and surf were an unending source of excitement, of vitality, of celebration, now rested on the Marina floor. With the wave he had created still rolling, growing, and gaining strength, Dennis pulled out for the last time. His thrilling ride was over. What a wave, what a ride.

Late Sports

Los Angeles Times

Morning Final

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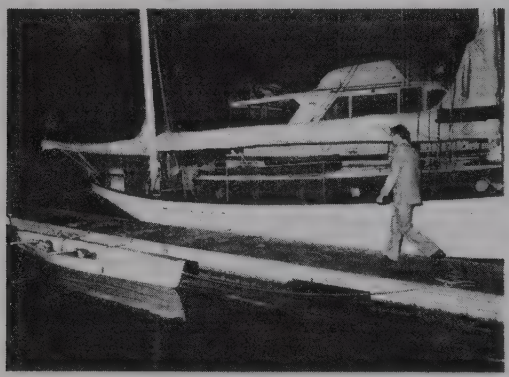
Beach Boys' Drummer Drowns



GEORGE FRY / Los Angeles Times

At left, empty slip next to boat where Dennis Wilson's body was found. At right, Bill Oster holds diving mask he said Wilson was wearing.

Dennis Wilson, 39, Dies While Diving at Marina

By JACK JONES and MICHAEL J. GOODMAN, *Times Staff Writers*

Drummer Dennis Wilson, 39, a founding member of the famed Beach Boys rock group, drowned Wednesday afternoon in the harbor at Marina del Rey, where he was diving in an empty boat slip, county lifeguards reported.

Wilson, one of three brothers who were the nucleus of the turbulent group that made "surf music" popular and gave Southern California its own rock identity in the early 1960s, reportedly failed to surface while diving at Slip C off Marquesas Way.

A friend, Bill Oster, also 39, hailed a Harbor Patrol boat at 4:40 p.m., according to Harbor Patrol spokesman Jim Cole. Oster said Wilson had been diving for about two hours before he failed to come up.

Harbor Patrolman John Rochford dove into the 58-degree water while Patrolman Tim Hazelwood called for a county lifeguard diving team. Seven divers worked in the dark water for 45 minutes before finding Wilson's body at a depth of 13 feet, Cole said.

Decided to Go Diving

Wilson was wearing only a pair of cutoff jeans.

Oster, a mechanical engineer who owns the 52-foot yawl Emerald, said Wilson joined him on the boat Tuesday night to relax and that during the day Wednesday, he

Los Angeles T

Dennis Wilson in 1977.

Thousands Tol to Flee Gas in Solvang Area

By MICHAEL SEILER and JOHN HURST, *Times Staff Writers*

Gloom and Doom for Centuries

For Germans, Angst

New Blast of Cold Lays Sheet of Ice From Texas to N.Y.

Pentagon Panel Criticizes U.S. Lebanon Policy

ROACHCLIPS ARCHIVE

10 IF I COULD LIVE MY LIFE AGAIN

One summer afternoon long ago, Dennis, aboard *The Harmony*, slid deftly across the glistening Pacific. The vessel's massive sails were taut, and the horizon beckoned. A curiously lucid thought entered the adventurer's usually distracted mind: "This is where I want to be buried. This is where I belong." To Dennis, a man who could never bear to remain in one place for very long, the unpredictable, everchanging nature of the ocean made it feel like a kind of home. The vast Pacific mirrored Dennis's own restless soul. Its waters always welcomed him, completely and unconditionally.

Burial at sea is an honor usually reserved for members of the military or those officially connected to the shipping industry. But when the Reagan Administration was informed of Dennis Wilson's desire to be laid to rest in the Pacific Ocean, an exception was made to the federal law that prohibits civilian sea burials. The surfer kid from Hawthorne was given an official burial at sea off the coast of California on January 4, 1984. Bearing Shawn, several of his children, and his brother Carl, a three-boat procession slowly made its way to the designated spot, and Dennis was finally committed to the sea. His loved ones, who had suffered so terribly during his last months, were heartened by the knowledge that Dennis would have wanted it this way.

A few days earlier, a memorial service had been held at an Inglewood cemetery chapel. Numerous press reports were issued describing how contentious factions within Dennis's extended family had begun sniping at each other: it seems that Dennis had possessed a talent for making each of his partners feel that she was the "one," and on that

day all of the grief and disappointment had come welling up. After the service, the mourners gathered at co-manager Tom Hulett's house. Mike and Brian shot baskets outside and talked about Dennis during happier times. Mike's relationship with Dennis may have been a battlefield, but on that day Mike was able to let down his guard and show his feelings. "We were all so much a part of each other that I'm sure we'll miss him every single day the rest of our lives," admitted Mike (quoted by Jim Jerome). "There's no way we'll not miss him."

At a press conference held in honor of their brother, cousin, and friend, the Beach Boys put on a brave face and a show of unity. Carl, of course, did the best job of articulating the group's feelings, and he made a point of mentioning Dennis's big heart. He also thanked Dennis's fans, telling them how much his brother had valued their support. Brian, close to tears, could not articulate his feelings and finally said, "I don't want to talk about it anymore."

The band canceled a couple of month's worth of concerts. The

DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION
UNITED STATES COAST GUARD

MAILING ADDRESS:
COMMANDER (dpf)
ELEVENTH COAST GUARD DISTRICT
UNION BANK BLDG.
400 OCEANGATE
LONG BEACH, CA. 90822

09 January 1984

Regional Director
Environmental Protection Agency
Region IX Office
100 California Street
San Francisco, California 94111

Dear Sir:

Pursuant to Title 40 CFR, Part 229, the remains of DENNIS WILSON were buried at sea by USCGC POINT JUDITH (WPB 82345) at 1711 local time (5:11 PM) 04 January 1984, in location 33-53.9°N, 118-38.8°W. This position is greater than three nautical miles from land and the water depth in excess of 100 fathoms.

Sincerely,

J. F. STOMPHF
Commander, U. S. Coast Guard
Chief, Planning Staff
By direction of the District Commander

KEITH REEVES ARCHIVE

living symbol of the endless adolescence that the Beach Boys had always celebrated had died, and the band was in shock. As that shock began to diminish, however, it seemed as though a great weight had been lifted — Dennis, after all, had put the band under extreme duress as he declined. Mike Love's take on this was, "A chain is only as strong as its weakest link" (quoted by Michael Goldberg).

When the tortured and unhealthy Brian Jones was kicked out of the Rolling Stones and then drowned in his own swimming pool, the Stones were freed from the burden he'd imposed upon them. Yet time would tell that Jones had imparted a special and irreplaceable mystique to the band. Similarly, the Beach Boys would never again be oppressed by the antics of their rebellious, substance-abusing drummer, but they would also discover that they'd been robbed of a great deal of their heart and soul. The Beach Boys would never be whole again. The band still encompassed a great deal of talent, but it had lost its fire. From this point on, the Beach Boys were artificial light.

In 1985, CBS/Caribou released its last Beach Boys LP, titled simply *The Beach Boys*. The album generated one minor hit: "Getcha Back," a song styled after "Don't Worry Baby" but lacking the great Brian Wilson lead vocal. Instead, it featured an excessively nasal Mike Love on lead; Brian contributed some background falsetto. With producer Steve Levine, Brian tried to duplicate Dennis's drumming style on "Getcha Back." By programming a drum machine to imitate his trademark snare slamming and recording it in a gymnasium for added ambiance, the pair hoped to capture the primitive energy that was Dennis's trademark. It was a nice thought, but what machine could ever stand in for Dennis Wilson? The Beach Boys dedicated the album to their deceased bandmate.

The band continued to uphold its legend and profile, remaining a powerful concert attraction, and feeding its audiences their fill of old hits. The Beach Boys were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1988, and during the induction ceremony, as the music industry looked on in disbelief, Mike Love called Mick Jagger "chickenshit" and insulted a good proportion of the rock community with his ultradefensive acceptance speech. Undeterred by that embarrassing episode, Mike then orchestrated the biggest commercial hit the Beach Boys had enjoyed since "Good Vibrations," twenty-one

years earlier. A Beach Boys single written by Love, with Papa John Phillips and Terry Melcher, called "Kokomo," was used in the film *Cocktail*, which starred Tom Cruise. The song's catchy beach groove and the video's heavy MTV rotation pushed the single all the way to number one. Love reaped the credit for this coup, but by rights — even though he didn't participate in the recording — Brian should have had a share of that credit. "Kokomo" (particularly its chorus) captures a typical Brian Wilson feel. Carl contributed some signature high vocals.

Despite the surprise success of "Kokomo," the Beach Boys have been without a major recording contract since the mid-eighties. Brian finally left the band, and in 1988 he released his first solo LP, on Sire Records, titled *Brian Wilson*. It was immediately hailed by many critics, and by Brian's unctuous fans, as the second coming of the great pop messiah. After the initial euphoria had subsided, however, most realized that the album was a somewhat stilted and mechanical effort. While *Brian Wilson* does include a couple of endearing moments — like the tender "Melt Away" — it is still the product of the artist under the control of his doctor.

Mike Love's Beach Boys released a terrible CD called *Summer in Paradise* in 1991 and backed TV-sitcom heartthrob John Stamos on a cover version of Dennis's "Forever." Stamos had been designated by some as "the Dennis of the nineties." He guested on percussion during Beach Boys tour dates and appeared in the "Kokomo" video. These days, Stamos is producing a network miniseries about the Beach Boys, scheduled to air in the new millenium, but some members of the Wilson family have been wary of supporting his project.

Throughout the past decade, an array of box sets, books, and movies was released that explored and exploited classic Beach Boys moments from the distant past. Among them was *Summer Dreams*, a disappointing made-for-TV movie (based on the William Gaines book *Heroes and Villains*), which focused mainly on Dennis and Brian but failed to capture their essence. Actor Bruce Greenwood gave a credible performance as Dennis, but the movie's weak script gave him very little to work with.

At last, Brian reentered the recovery zone and was able to free himself of Dr. Landy. In 1998, he released *Imagination* on Giant Records. The album had a more relaxed quality than any of his work

since the seventies, and it felt like a new foundation — a base on which to start the rebuilding process. The album was a cause for celebration, but almost as soon as Brian had completed it, tragedy struck once more. Carl had been suffering from lung cancer for some time, and the insidious disease had spread to his brain. As he fought valiantly for his life, Audree Wilson suddenly passed away. Then, on February 6, 1998, Carl succumbed to his cancer, leaving Brian the only surviving member of his immediate family.

Again, death sent shock waves through the band. This time, Al Jardine was compelled to speak up. He speculated about the band's future, stating that Carl's voice was an essential element of the Beach Boys' sound — they could not do without it. Al had a major falling out with Mike, and suddenly became a champion of the works of Dennis Wilson. He told some people close to the band that he'd never realized how great Dennis was because he was always such a pain to deal with — better late than never. For his part, Mike was bent on flogging the dead horse known as the Beach Boys. In 1997, when Carl became too sick to tour, Mike had recruited none other than ex-member David Marks to fill in, thirty-four years after he'd been booted out of the group. It was all part of Mike's determination to mine the past, to wring profit from the band's formidable legacy.

Those who attended Carl Wilson's memorial service were deeply moved when his song "Heaven" was played. The sound of Carl's gentle singing voice in that context was almost unbearably poignant. Among those who came to say their farewells were three of Dennis's ex-wives: Carole, Barbara, and Karen. Shawn did not attend. Since Dennis's death, she has rarely been seen in public. She is reportedly suffering from stomach cancer, and in recent years she has led an up-and-down existence. Gage has turned into a robust teenager, a volatile product of the Wilson/Love genes. If Dennis had lived, he would now be a grandfather — to his daughter Jennifer's child. It's hard to imagine. Jennifer and her brother Scott have experienced personal problems, likely stemming from the powerful frustration they felt as they witnessed their father's long and painful decline. Carl's son Justyn and Dennis's son Carl have formed a musical partnership, called In Bloom, and each plays his father's instrument. Dennis's son Michael is a well-known chef who currently plies his trade in Santa Monica.

These days, three competing Beach Boys factions battle it out for the affections of the band's sometimes baffled fan base. Mike Love, along with Bruce Johnston and a slew of sidemen, tour under the name of the Beach Boys. Their set list includes all of the simplest-to-play oldies and a truly sickening medley of "Good Vibrations/ Kokomo." David Marks is no longer involved. Al Jardine fronts an act called Beach Boys Family and Friends, which is much truer to the music of the original band. Al's sons Adam and Matt, along with Brian's daughters Carnie and Wendy, provide an impressive vocal depth that allows this group to pull off credible versions of the most complex Beach Boys material. Billy Hinsche, with his wealth of touring experience, directs the group's backing band. Unfortunately, Mike has made it difficult for Family and Friends to get bookings, using whatever obstacles and leverage he can. And then there's Brian. Encouraged by his second wife, Melinda, he still does the occasional tour, as well, much to the delight of his fans. No one seems to notice that Brian himself would probably rather stay at home.

Dennis Wilson has become something of a trend, and that trend is growing. The band Primal Scream has covered Dennis's "Carry Me Home," and Lush recorded his song "Lady" back in 1992. Various bootleg recordings of his unreleased music have been circulating for years, and now there are rumors that official releases are in the works. Sadly, Dennis's great solo album is out of print in the US. Of course, that could change, because many people regard *Pacific Ocean Blue* as one of the best records of its era. John Hanlon, who has worked with the likes of, among others, Neil Young, Jackson Browne, and Pearl Jam, tells me that he was recently hired by R.E.M. on the merits of his association with Dennis Wilson: "Peter Buck told me that the fact I worked on *Pacific Ocean Blue* was the main reason R.E.M. wanted me." Dennis opened the door for a succession of people starting out in the business. "He was my best friend and he gave me my first break," says Hanlon. "If he could have cleaned up and gotten straight there is no limit to what he could have done. Dennis was just a genius."

Regardless of this recognition, Dennis's musical contributions remain overlooked in many quarters. A lot of people are still convinced that Brian had all the talent and the Beach Boys were just along for the ride. The truth is, as always, much more complex. While Brian

had the innate ability to communicate his gift directly, Dennis, like a dyslexic, could not decipher the formula. Instead, he had to work hard to develop his own creative language. To some, that language is not readily accessible, but for those willing to listen closely, without prejudice, the rewards are big. Dennis compiled a body of work that has stood the test of time. It lives on, as passionate and truthful as the day it was created.

DURING the extended process of researching this book, I often found myself traveling the route Dennis had traveled years before. I wanted to familiarize myself with his environment, so I explored Hawthorne, the Strand beaches, Benedict Canyon, Sunset Strip, Malibu, and all the LA haunts of Dennis's active youth. I also visited Venice, Santa Monica, and Marina Del Rey, where I sat in the low-rent bars and cocktail lounges that Dennis frequented during his last years. One thing became very clear to me over the course of these wanderings: Dennis left his mark. Everyone who hung out in these places during his tenure remembers him. They remember him as a guy who always had a kind word and a smile to offer. They remember him as someone who would treat them as equals, no matter how good or bad things were. They also remember him as an extremely volatile character who could quickly cause all kinds of trouble. Their recollections are incredibly consistent.

One interesting individual I met in a Venice bar told me an amazing story — one that sent chills up my spine. His name was Bill Transville, and he looked like he'd lived his life on a barstool. I ran into him in the early afternoon. Knocking back several cocktails, he described his memories of Dennis. Then he related a story a friend of his had told him years earlier. "Did you know that Dennis's ghost hitchhikes up and down the coast?" he began in his lazy, alcohol-drenched mumble. "What?" I demanded, incredulous. "My buddy Tony and his old lady found a guy hitchhiking on the PCH [Pacific Coast Highway] one day. They pick the guy up, and he climbs in the truck next to them. They ask where he's going, and the dude says, 'Up the coast to see my ex-wife.' He was wearing cutoffs, and after a couple of minutes he's gone." "What do you mean, 'gone?'" I said.

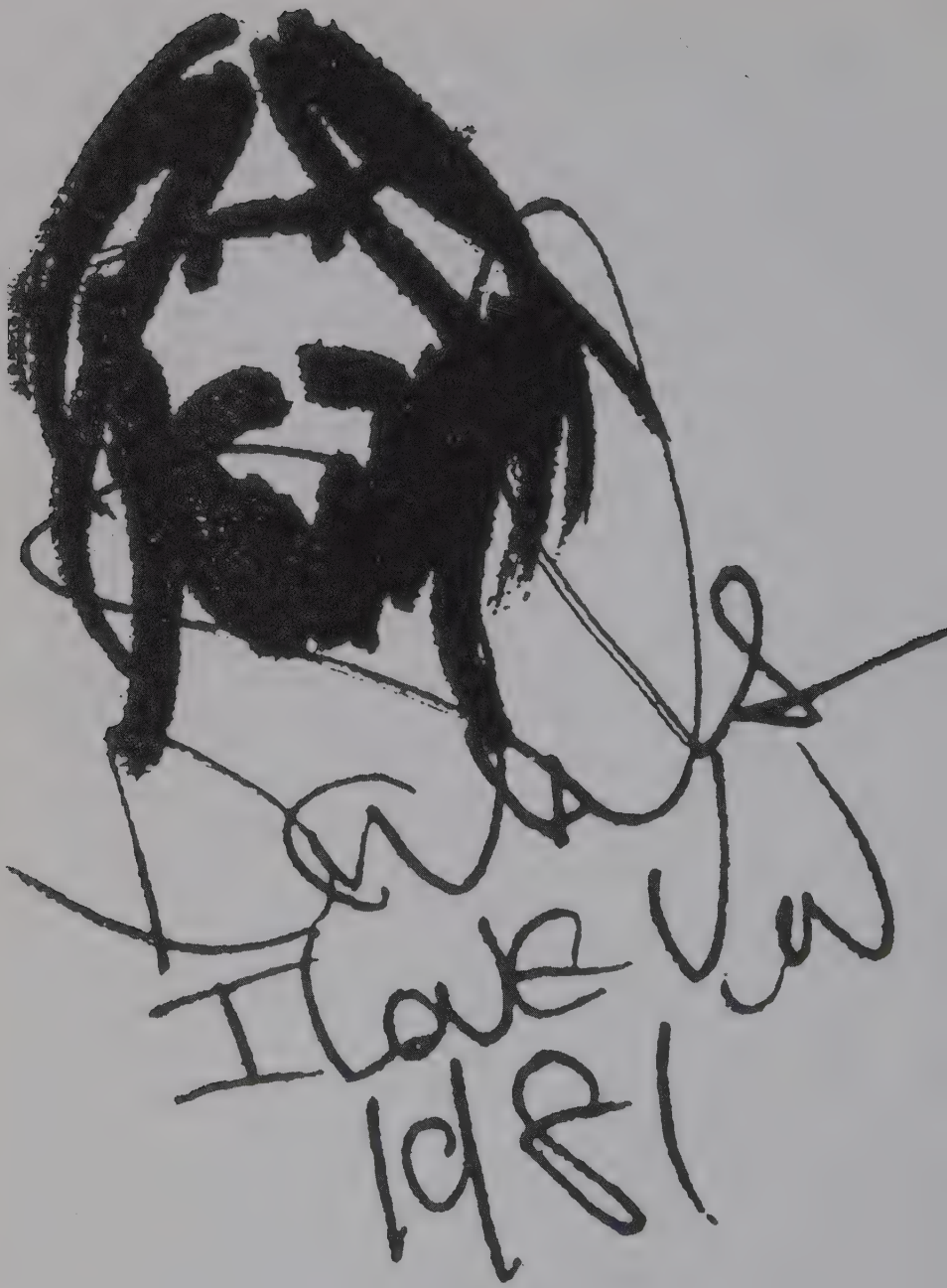
"Poof! Gone! He wasn't there anymore," replied Transville with a little grin. "Tony's chick started freaking out and he fucking had to pull over so she could puke." I sat there wondering if I even wanted to ask the next question. "How did he know it was Dennis?" I finally said, feeling very skeptical and a little put out. "Cause it happened again a few months later, and it was the same dude in the same cutoffs, and he asked him." "Asked him what?" I persisted. "Who he was," slurred Transville. "The dude in the cutoffs said his name was Dennis, and he was going to find Karen, and then, boom! He disappeared again. Pretty freaky, huh? Tony's seen his picture man — believe me, it was him! Other people have told me the same thing. Drive up there. You'll probably see him." Bill Transville continued to drink. I thanked him and departed.

After that, I couldn't resist taking another drive up the coast. I'd traveled this stretch of road countless times over the years, and as I began my trek I remembered an afternoon on the PCH some ten years earlier, when I lost the brakes on my '68 Cadillac El Dorado and somehow managed to coast it to safety. Another night, I went bodysurfing in the moonlight with a few friends, and we had to cross this highway on foot to get back to our car. Out of nowhere careened a car, its driver asleep at the wheel. It just missed us, sideswiping a parked car and spinning around to a stop. Yet another incident along the PCH had disturbed me most of all. I was strolling on the beach with two friends on a typically glorious California afternoon. The three of us were tentatively enjoying a chemically altered state of consciousness, when, before our eyes, a white Corvette with two people inside rocketed off a cliff, sailed, nose down, onto the rocks below, and exploded. To me, there has always been something intense and dangerous about this part of the PCH, and now here I was searching along it for a ghost. The late afternoon sun played tricks with my eyes; I kept squinting to make sure I didn't miss that hitchhiker. If I found him I figured the encounter would be the ultimate entry for my book — a posthumous interview. As I drove, I thought about what I'd ask Dennis.

"If you could live your life again, what would you change? Would you take better care of yourself, spend more time with your kids? Would you slow down?" The answer to the last one is obvious. There is no way Denny could have remained Denny if he'd slowed

down. He was formulated to travel at one speed — fast — and he knew it. Raised on Murry's alternating current of love and cruelty, sandwiched for life between Brian the genius and Carl the good boy, boarding the wealth-and-fame roller coaster while still just a teenager, Dennis became a restless seeker who had to touch everything he saw and taste everything he touched. He was forever looking for something — anything — to fill the emptiness inside.

As I continued my drive up the stunningly beautiful Pacific Coast that afternoon, I saw no hitchhiker, I encountered no ghost. I could see the light sparkling on row upon row of dancing waves. I was filled with a sense of well-being. As my gaze traveled farther out across the water, my unconstrained imagination clearly caught sight of him. Living his life, living our dream. There was Dennis, sailing along on *The Harmony* with beautiful Karen at his side and the open sea beckoning. Full sails, full of life, full speed ahead. Farewell, my friend.



Self Portrait

ROACHCLIPS ARCHIVE

Dennis Wilson's Los Angeles

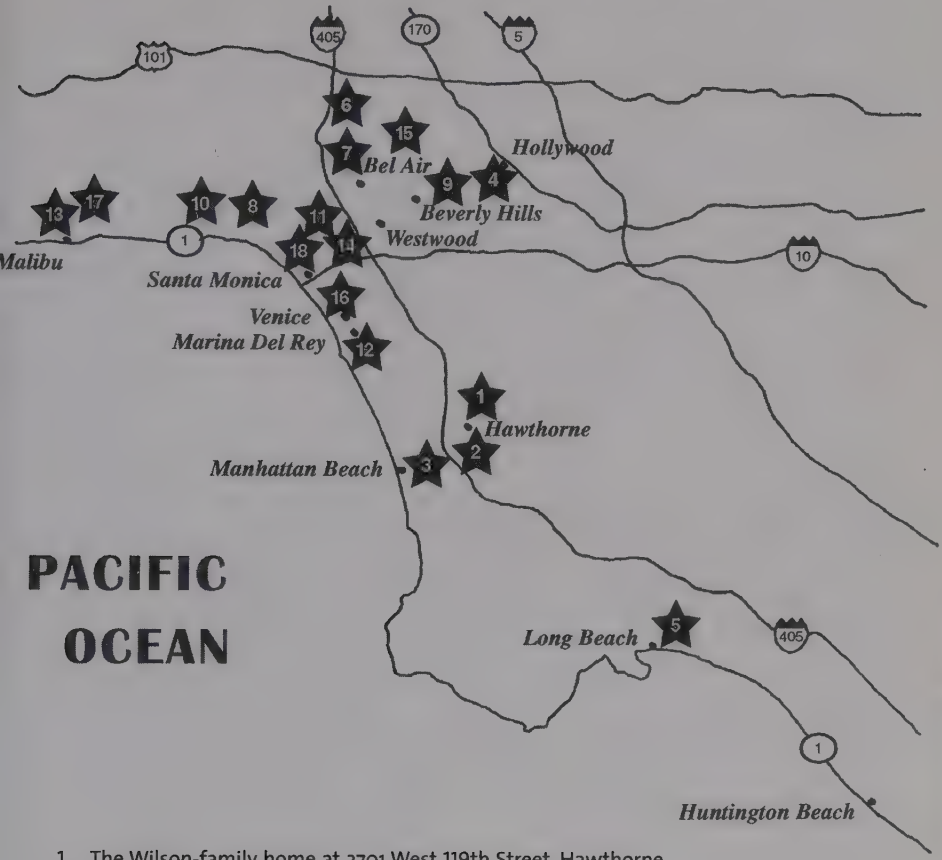


Illustration by Nadia Brenner

1. The Wilson-family home at 3701 West 119th Street, Hawthorne
2. Hawthorne High School
3. Manhattan Beach Pier at 26th Street
4. Capitol Records Tower, Vine Street, Hollywood
5. Lion's Dragstrip, Long Beach
6. House Dennis shared with Carole in Benedict Canyon
7. Brian's Home and Studio at 10452 Belagio Road, Bel Air
8. Dennis's house at 14400 Sunset Blvd. (where he was joined by the Manson family)
9. Whisky A Go Go, Sunset Strip
10. The first house Dennis shared with Barbara, Embery Avenue, Pacific Palisades
11. Brother Studio at 1454 Fifth Street, Santa Monica
12. Marquesa Way, Marina Del Rey (where *The Harmony* was docked; Dennis drowned here)
13. House Dennis shared with Karen at 31284 Broad Beach Road, Malibu
14. Village Recorders, West Los Angeles
15. Christine's estate in Coldwater Canyon
16. Dennis's Venice Beach house at Wavecrest Avenue (where he met Shawn)
17. House Dennis shared with Shawn at 6120 Trancas Canyon Road
18. Santa Monica Bay Inn & Chez Jays (Dennis's favorite bar) on Ocean Avenue, Santa Monica

SOURCE LIST

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Interviews conducted over the phone or in person. The following people were interviewed between February 1998 and June 1999:

> Tom Alford, Rodney Bingenheimer, Hal Blaine, Alan Boyd, Scott Brizel, Trisha Roach Campo, Ed Carter, Les Chan, Waldo Chester, Betty Collignon, Marisa Conover, Don Cunningham, Lee Dempsey, Dick Dixon, Chris Duffy, Ricky Fataar, Bobby Figueroa, Kim Fowley, James William Guercio, Bob Hanes, John Hanlon, Chuck Harter, Billy Hinsche, Gregg Jakobson, Jamie James, Stephen Kalinich, Carole Kaye, Elliot Kendall, Mike Kowalski, Harvey Kubernik, Karen Lamm, Earle Mankey, Mickey McGowan, Mike Meros, Tom Murphy, Domenic Priore, Keith Reeves, Ed Roach, Jerry Schilling, Neal Skok, P.F. Sloan, Bill Transville, Fred Vail, Ron Weeks, Barbara Wilson, and Carl B. Wilson.

Personal conversations and contacts. These occurred during the author's years as a musician, record-company employee, and resident of Los Angeles, from June 1978 to September 1987. The author spoke with the following individuals:

> Hal Blaine, Steven Desper, Billy Hinsche, Bruce Johnston, Mike Love, Audree Wilson, Brian Wilson, Carl Wilson, Dennis Wilson, and Gary Usher.

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Dennis Wilson
THE REAL BEACH BOY

In *Dennis Wilson: The Real Beach Boy*, Jon Stebbins candidly and passionately tells the first in-depth story about one of rock and roll's most intriguing figures – the drummer and founding member of a legendary band. A sunkissed surfer on the beaches of California, with an insatiable sexual appetite and dare-devil approach to life, Dennis Wilson was the wild and reckless brother who fired Brian Wilson's imagination and helped spark a cultural tidal wave in the form of the Beach Boys. His life was a short, brilliant, intoxicating ride that ended in addiction, despair, and finally self-destruction at age 39.

When asked in a recent interview about his brother's musical talents, Brian – always known as the truly gifted Beach Boy – admitted that Dennis "was a genius in his own right." With a keen eye for detail, Jon Stebbins plunges into the manic and melodic life of the man to create a splendid harmony all his own.

Includes over 60 photos, many of which appear here for the first time.

Jon Stebbins is a fourth-generation Californian who has spent most of his life composing, performing, collecting, studying, and writing about popular music. He is currently working on a screenplay about Buddy Holly's last tour.

"Possibly the best book ever written about the Beach Boys."
– Chuck Harter, author and pop historian

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